



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

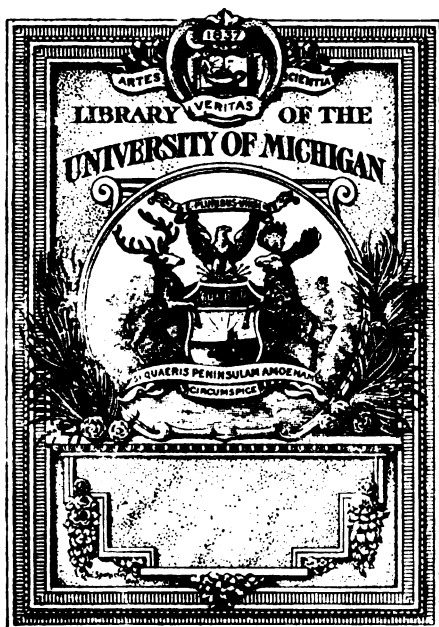
Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

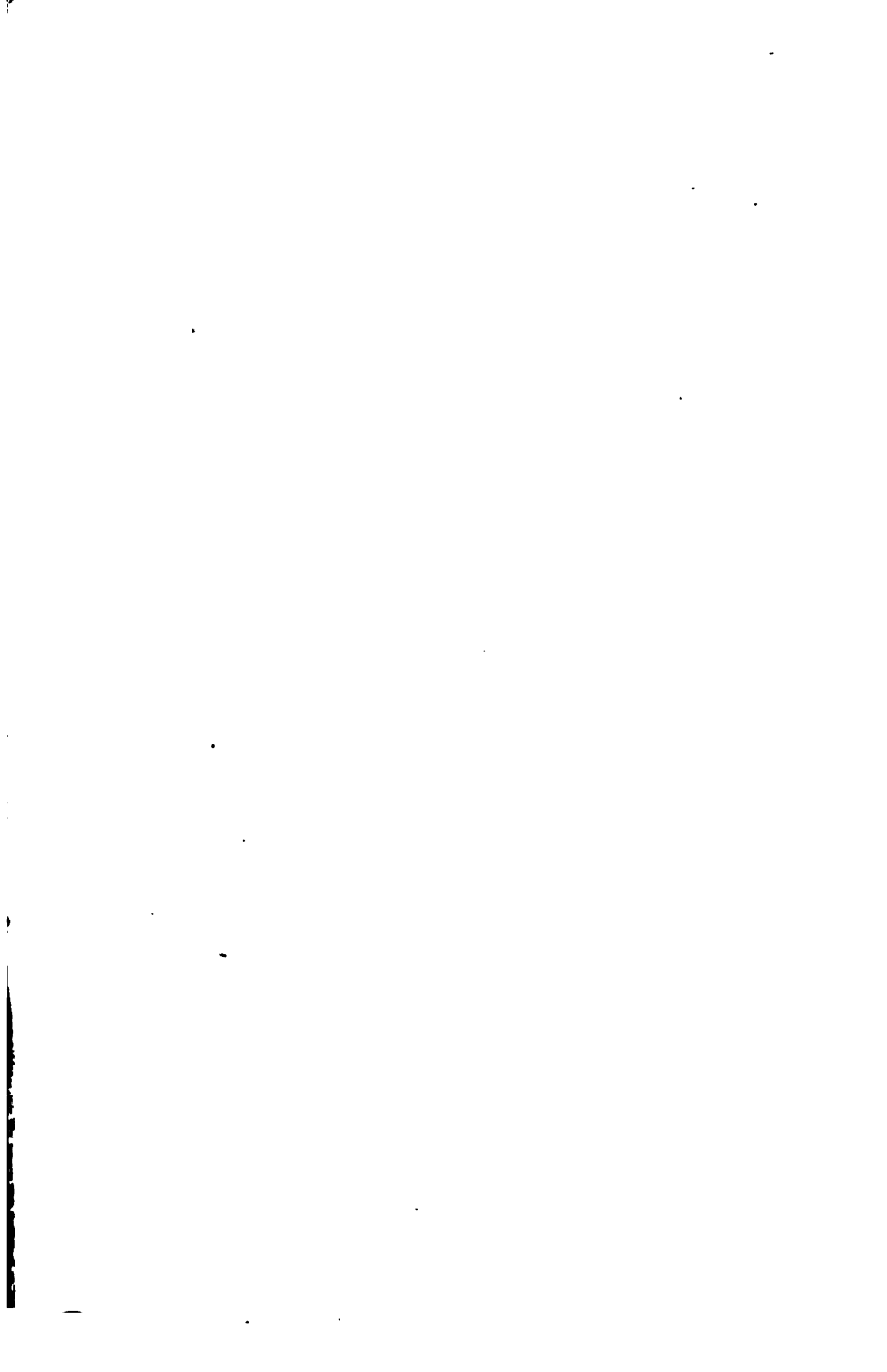
Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

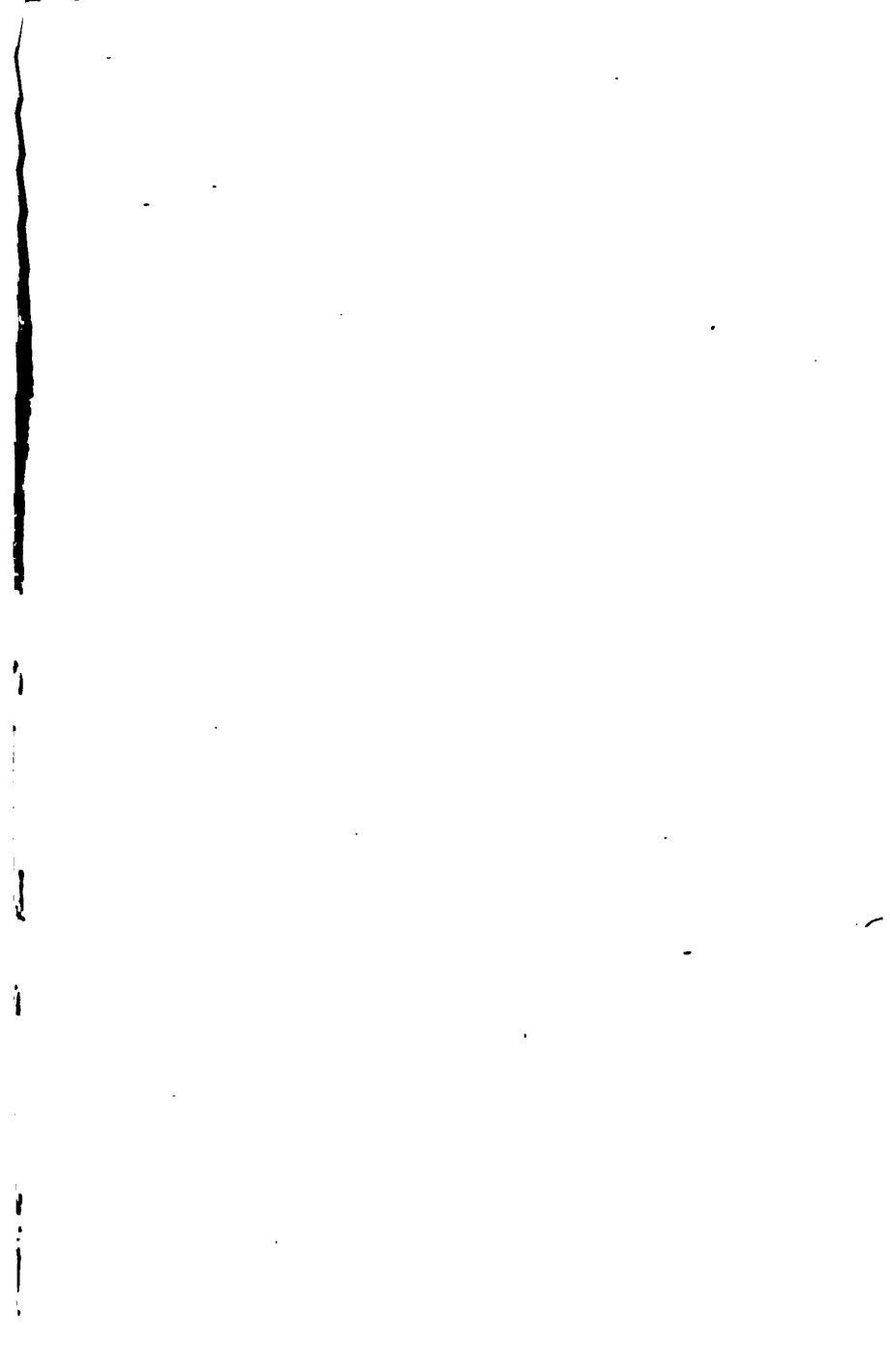


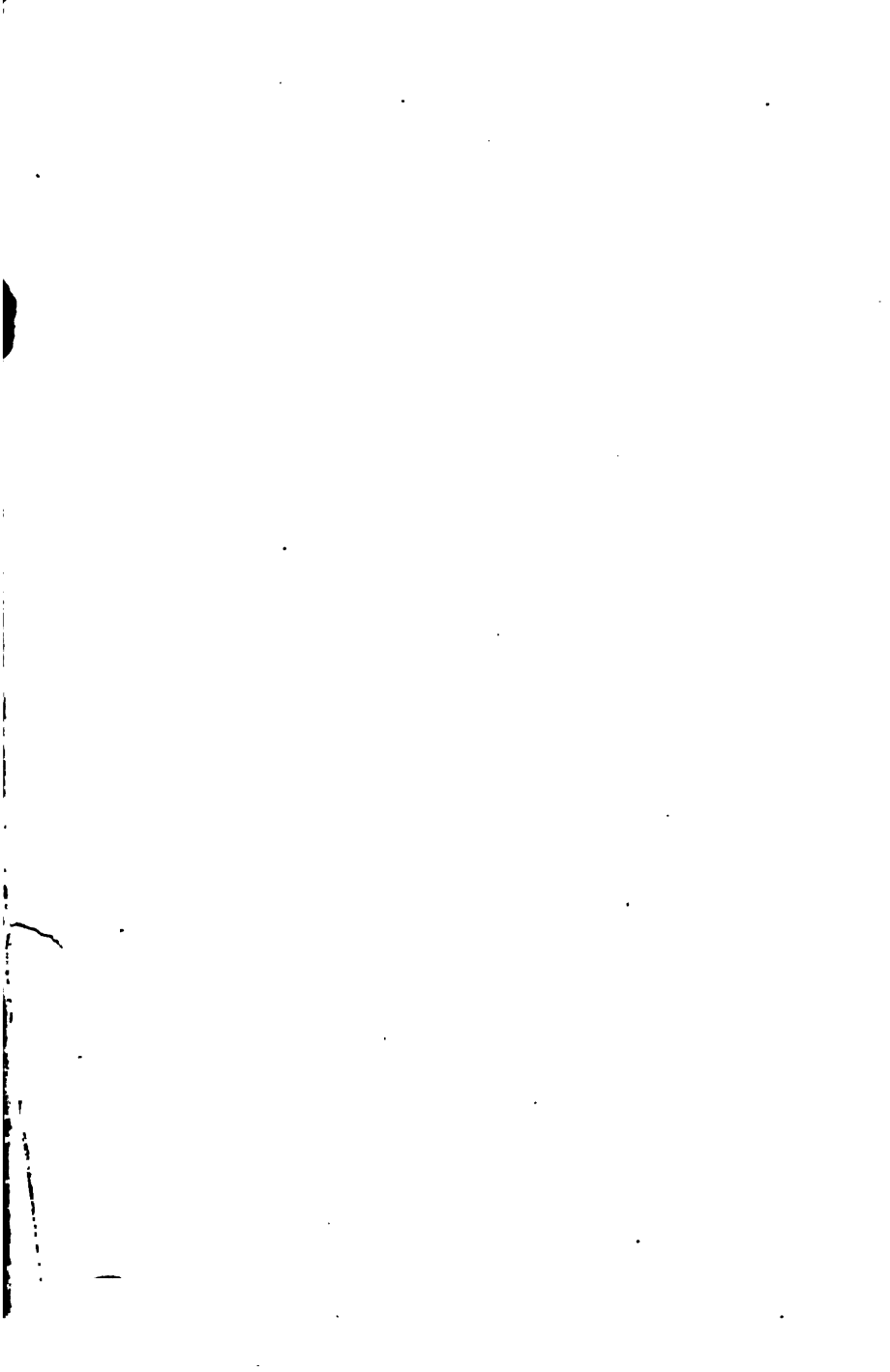
4

G 11 d

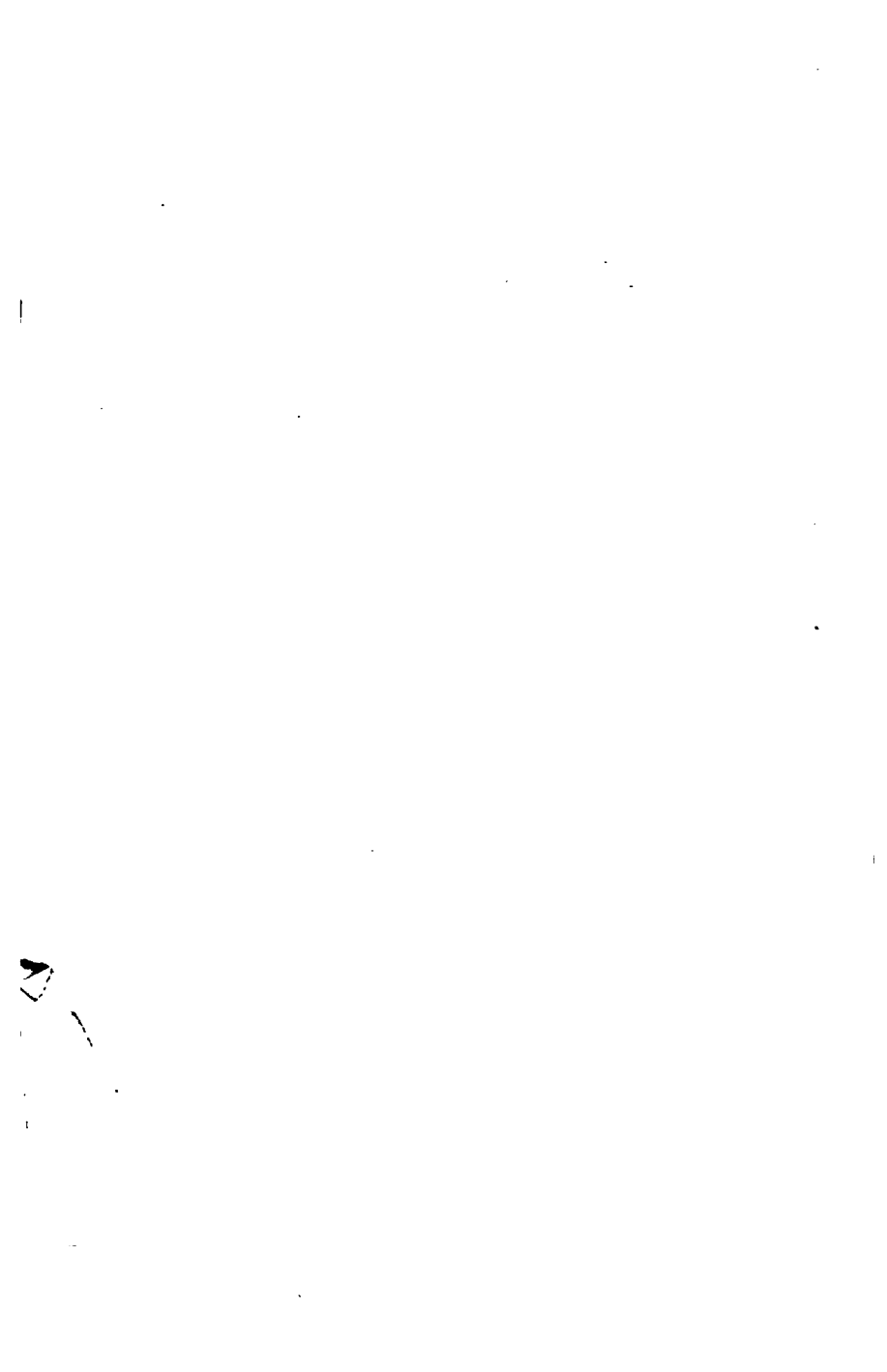
t I







FILE NO. 113



FILE NO. II3

BY

ÉMILE GABORIAU

Author of

"MONSIEUR LECOQ," "THE LEROUGE AFFAIR," ETC.

Translated by

GEORGE BURNHAM IVES



BOSTON

LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY

1899

Copyright, 1899,
BY LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY

All rights reserved

University Press
JOHN WILSON AND SON, CAMBRIDGE, U.S.A.

FILE No. 113



I

ALL the evening newspapers of Tuesday, February 28, 186—, contained the following item of *current news* : —

“A very considerable theft, of which an honorable banker of the capital, M. André Fauvel, is the victim, created a lively sensation in the neighborhood of Rue de Provence this morning. Thieves of extraordinary boldness and skill succeeded in making their way into the offices, and there, forcing open a safe which there was every reason to suppose burglar-proof, they appropriated the enormous sum of 350,000 francs in bank-notes.

“The police, being instantly notified, displayed their accustomed zeal, and their investigations have been crowned with success. Already, we are informed, a clerk in the employ of the house, one P—— B——, has been arrested ; everything justifies the hope that his accomplices will soon be in the grasp of the law.”

For four whole days all Paris talked of nothing but this robbery. Then momentous events supervened : an acrobat broke his leg at the Circus, a young woman made her début at a small theatre, and the “news item” of February 28 was forgotten.

But the newspapers, on this occasion, had been — perhaps designedly — incompletely or, at least, inac-

curately informed. The sum of 350,000 francs had in fact been stolen at M. André Fauvel's, but not in the manner indicated. A clerk had in fact been arrested provisionally, but no definite charge had been made against him. This theft, of unusual magnitude though it was, remained unexplained at least, if not inexplicable.

However, here are the facts, as they are set down with painstaking exactitude in the reports of the inquiry.

II

THE banking-house of André Fauvel, number 87 Rue de Provence, is an establishment of much importance, and, owing to its large number of employés, it has almost the appearance of a government department. The offices are on the ground floor, and the windows which look on the street are supplied with iron bars of sufficient size and placed near enough together to discourage attack. A broad glass door gives access to an immense vestibule where three or four attendants are stationed from morning till night. At the right are the rooms to which the public is admitted and a passageway leading to the wicket of the main counting-room. The offices for correspondence, the book-keeper's office and the general offices are at the left. At the rear one can see a small glazed court-yard upon which open seven or eight wickets, useless at ordinary times, but indispensable on certain days of larger disbursements.

M. André Fauvel's private office is on the first floor. It communicates directly with the offices by a small, dark staircase, narrow and very steep, which leads to the room occupied by the principal cashier.

This room, which is called "the counting-room" in the establishment, is protected against a sudden attack, and almost against a regular siege, being quite as heavily armored as a monitor. The doors and the partition in which the wicket is cut are sheathed with thick sheet-iron plates, and the opening of the chimney is obstructed by a stout grating.

In that room, fastened into the wall by enormous cramp-irons, is the safe, one of those fanciful and formidable pieces of furniture which set the poor devil to dreaming whose whole fortune can easily be placed in a purse. This safe, a masterpiece of the firm of Becquet, is two metres high by a metre and a half wide. It is made entirely of sheet-iron, has triple walls, and is divided within into isolated compartments for greater security in case of fire.

This huge object is opened by a tiny little key. But the key is of the very slightest importance in opening it. Five movable steel buttons, on which are carved all the letters of the alphabet, are the essential part of the powerful and ingenious apparatus for locking the safe. Before putting the key in the lock, you must be able to place the letters on the buttons in the order in which they stood when it was closed. So that, at M. Fauvel's as in most other business houses, the safe was locked with a word, which was frequently changed. That word only the head of the house and the cashier knew. They also, and only they, had keys.

With such a piece of furniture a man should be able to sleep on both ears, even though he own as many diamonds as the Duke of Brunswick. He runs but one risk, it seems to me, the risk of forgetting the word which is the "Open, Sesame" of the iron door.

On the 28th of February, the clerks of the house of Fauvel arrived at their desks as usual in the morning. At half after nine they were all at their tasks, when a middle-aged man, very dark, with a military carriage and dressed in deep mourning, made his appearance in the office next the counting-room, where five or six clerks were at work.

He asked to speak to the principal cashier. He was told that the cashier had not yet arrived, and furthermore that the office did not open until ten, which fact was announced by a large placard in the vestibule.

This reply seemed to disconcert and annoy the new-comer to the last degree.

"I thought," he said in a sharp tone, closely bordering on impertinence, "that I should find some one to whom to apply, having made an appointment yesterday with M. Fauvel. I am Comte Louis de Clameran, iron-master at Oloron; I have come to withdraw 300,000 francs deposited with the firm by my brother whose sole heir I am. It is surprising that no orders have been given."

Neither the title of the noble iron-master nor his arguments seemed to affect the clerks.

"The cashier has not arrived," they repeated; "we can do nothing."

"Then take me to M. Fauvel."

There was a certain hesitation among the clerks, but a young man named Cayillon, who was working near the window, answered: —

"The master is always out at this time of day."

"Then I will call again," said M. de Clameran.

And he went out, without bowing or touching the rim of his hat, as he had come in.

"The customer's not very polite," said little Cayillon; "but he has no luck, for here's Prosper now."

Prosper Bertomy, the head cashier of the house of André Fauvel, was a tall handsome fellow of thirty, with fair hair and blue eyes, neat even to foppishness and dressed in the latest fashion. He would have been very attractive indeed, except that he carried English manners to excess, assuming a cold and affectedly grave air at pleasure, and that he had a certain air of self-sufficiency which spoiled his naturally bright and smiling countenance.

"Ah! there you are," cried Cavaillon; "somebody has been here asking for you already."

"Who? An iron-master, was n't it?"

"Just so."

"Very good; he'll come again. Knowing that I should arrive late this morning, I made my preparations yesterday."

Prosper had opened his office door as he spoke, and he passed through, closing the door behind him.

"Upon my word!" cried one of the clerks, "there's a cashier who does as he pleases. The master has stormed at him twenty times because he always comes too late, and he cares as much for him as he does for the year forty."

"Faith, he's quite right, as long as he gets all he wants from the master."

"And then, how could he come early,—a fellow who leads a hellish life; who sits up all night and every night? Did you notice his graveyard look this morning?"

"He must have been playing cards again as he did last month. Couturier told me that he lost fifteen hundred francs at a single sitting."

"Is his work any the less well done?" Cavaillon interrupted. "If you were in his place—"

He stopped short. The counting-room door opened and the cashier came out, walking unsteadily.

"Robbed!" he stammered, "I have been robbed!"

Prosper's expression, his hoarse voice, the nervous trembling which shook his whole body so clearly indicated horrible suffering that all the clerks rose as one man, and ran toward him. He almost fell into their arms, he could no longer stand, he felt ill, he must sit down.

Meanwhile his colleagues crowded about him, all questioning him at once, urging him to explain.

"Robbed!" they said; "where, how, by whom?"

Prosper gradually recovered his faculties.

"Somebody has taken all I had in the safe," he replied.

"All?"

"Yes, three packages of a hundred thousand francs, and one of fifty thousand. The four packages were wrapped in a paper and tied together."

With the rapidity of lightning the news that a theft had been committed had spread through the establishment; curious clerks gathered from all directions; the office was full.

"Tell us," said young Cavaillon to Prosper, "has the safe been forced?"

"No, it is intact."

"Why, in that case—"

"In that case it is, none the less a fact that last night I had 350,000 francs and that I can't find them this morning."

Everybody held his peace; one old clerk alone did not share in the general consternation.

"Don't lose your head so, Monsieur Bertomy," he said; "just remember that the master may have disposed of the money."

The unhappy cashier sprang to his feet; he snatched at that idea.

"Yes," he cried, "true, you are right; it must be the master."

But, upon reflection, he added, in a tone of profound discouragement: —

"No, no, it is n't possible. Never, in the five years I have had charge of the safe, has Monsieur Fauvel opened it without me. Two or three times he has needed money, and he has always waited for me or sent for me rather than take it in my absence."

"No matter," remonstrated Cavaillon, "before you despair, you should send word to him."

But M. André Fauvel was already notified. A messenger had gone up to his private office and told him what had happened. Just as Cavaillon proposed to go in search of him, he appeared.

M. André Fauvel was a man of about fifty years, of medium height, with hair just turning gray. He was rather stout, slightly bent, like all indefatigable workers, and he had a habit of swaying from side to side as he walked.

Never had any act of his belied the kindly expression of his face. He had a bluff manner, a bright, honest eye and full, red lips. A native of the suburbs of Aix, he would adopt, when he became excited, a slight Provençal accent, which gave a peculiar savor to his wit; for he was witty.

The news reported by the messenger had moved him deeply, for he who was ordinarily so red had become deathly pale.

"What is this I hear?" he asked the clerks, who respectfully stood aside to make way for him; "what has happened?"

M. Fauvel's voice restored to the cashier the arti-

ficial energy born of great crises; the decisive and dreaded moment had arrived; he rose and walked toward his employer.

"Monsieur," he began, "having the payment you know of to make this morning, I sent to the bank yesterday afternoon for 350,000 francs."

"Why yesterday afternoon, monsieur?" interposed the banker. "I should say that I had ordered you a hundred times to wait until the day the money is wanted."

"I know it, monsieur; I did wrong, but the mischief is done. Last night I locked up the money; it has disappeared, and still the safe has not been forced."

"Why, you are mad!" cried M. Fauvel, "you are dreaming!"

These few words destroyed the last hope, but the very horror of the situation gave to Prosper, not the coolness of a matured resolution, but that sort of dazed indifference which follows unforeseen catastrophes. He seemed almost unconcerned as he replied: —

"Unfortunately I am not mad, I am not dreaming; I am stating the fact."

This placid demeanor at such a moment seemed to exasperate M. Fauvel. He seized Prosper by the arm and shook him roughly.

"Speak!" he cried, "speak! who do you suppose opened the safe?"

"I cannot tell."

"You and I are the only ones who know the words; you and I are the only ones who have keys!"

That was a formal accusation; at all events the auditors so understood it. But the cashier's terrifying tranquillity did not give way. He gently extri-

cated himself from his employer's grasp and said, very slowly: —

"In very truth, monsieur, nobody can have taken this money, except myself—"

"Wretch!"

Prosper recoiled, and with his eyes obstinately fixed on M. André Fauvel's, he added: —

"Or you!"

The banker made a threatening gesture, and no one can say what would have happened if they had not heard, all at once, a noisy dispute at the door leading into the vestibule. A customer insisted upon entering, despite the remonstrances of the attendants, and enter he did, in fact. It was M. de Clameran.

All the clerks assembled in the office stood motionless, rooted to the spot; the silence was deathlike and solemn. It was easy to see that some terrible question — a question of life or death — was under discussion among all those men.

The iron-master chose to see nothing. He came forward with his hat on his head, and said in the same impertinent tone: —

"It is after ten o'clock, messieurs."

No one replied, and M. de Clameran was about to continue, when he spied the banker, whom he had not before seen. He walked straight up to him.

"At last I find you, monsieur," he exclaimed, "and it is very fortunate indeed. Once already this morning I came here; the counting-room was not open, the cashier had not arrived, you were away."

"You are mistaken, monsieur; I was in my office."

"I was told a different story; and see, it was this gentleman here who told me."

The iron-master pointed to Cavaillon.

"However, that matters little," he continued; "I

return, and this time not only is the counting-room closed, but I am refused admission to the offices. I took it upon myself to disregard your orders; you will be good enough to tell me whether I can or cannot withdraw my funds."

M. Fauvel listened, trembling with wrath; he was no longer pale, but purple; however, he restrained himself.

"I should be obliged to you, monsieur," he said at last in a low voice "if you would kindly give me a little time."

"If I remember aright, you told me —"

"True, yesterday. But this morning, at this moment, I learned that I have been robbed of 350,000 francs."

M. de Clameran bowed ironically.

"Must I wait very long?" he asked.

"Long enough for me to send to the Bank."

Thereupon, turning his back to the iron-master, M. Fauvel returned to his cashier.

"Draw a check," he said; "send as quickly as possible; let some one take a carriage to the Bank to draw out the available funds there."

Prosper did not budge.

"Did you hear me?" demanded the banker, on the point of breaking out.

The cashier started; one would have said that he had been dreaming.

"It is useless to send," he replied coldly; "monsieur's claim is three hundred thousand francs, and we have n't a hundred thousand left at the Bank."

You would have sworn that M. de Clameran anticipated that reply, for he murmured: —

"Of course."

He said nothing more; but his voice, his gesture, his expression said clearly enough: —

"The comedy is well played, but it is a comedy; I am not taken in."

Alas! while the iron-master thus brutally let his opinion be divined, the clerks, after Prosper's reply, knew not what to think. The fact is that Paris, at that moment, had been stirred to its depths by certain startling financial disasters. The fever of speculation had caused some old and solid houses to totter. Honorable men, the proudest of men, had been seen going from door to door imploring help and accommodation. Credit, that *rara avis* of tranquillity and peace, hesitated to light, and was ready to spread its wings and fly away at the slightest suspicious sound.

So it was that the idea of a comedy arranged beforehand between the banker and his cashier might very well occur to the mind of those who, if not forewarned, were at all events in a position to understand all the expedients which, by gaining time, increase the chances of salvation.

M. Fauvel had had too much experience not to divine the impression produced by Prosper's remark; he read a most mortifying suspicion in every eye.

"Oh! never fear, monsieur," he said hastily to M. de Clameran; "my house has other resources; please be patient, I will return at once."

He left the room, went up to his private office, and in five minutes reappeared with a letter and a package of papers in his hand.

"Here, Couturier," he said to one of his clerks, "take my carriage, which is being harnessed, and drive at once with monsieur to M. de Rothschild. You will deliver this letter and these securities, and they will give you in exchange 300,000 francs, which you will hand to monsieur."

The iron-master's disappointment was perceptible

enough; he seemed desirous to apologize for his impertinence.

"Pray believe me, monsieur," he began, "that I had no purpose to offend. We have had business relations for some years and never —"

"Enough, monsieur," interposed the banker, "I ask for no apologies. In business there are neither acquaintances nor friends. I owe you money, I am not prepared to pay, you are — insistent; that is fair, you are within your rights. Go with my clerk, he will hand you your money."

Then he turned to the clerks, whom curiosity had drawn to the spot.

"As for you, messieurs," he said, "be good enough to return to your desks."

In a twinkling the office adjoining the counting-room was empty. Only the clerks remained whose work was there, and they sat at their desks, with their noses on their paper, apparently absorbed by their tasks.

Still under the spell of the events which had succeeded one another so rapidly, M. André Fauvel paced back and forth, intensely, feverishly excited, emitting some exclamation at intervals, in a smothered voice.

Prosper for his part had remained standing against the partition, as if nailed to it. Pale as death, utterly crushed, his eyes staring into space, he seemed to have lost even the power of thinking.

At last, after a long silence, the banker stopped in front of Prosper; he had made up his mind and chosen the course to be followed.

"Now we must have an explanation," he said; "go into your office."

The cashier obeyed without a word, almost auto-

matically, and his master followed him, taking good care to close the door behind them.

Nothing in that office indicated the presence of malefactors who were strangers in the house. Everything was in its place; not a paper had been disturbed. The safe was open, and on the upper shelf could be seen a considerable number of *rouleaux* of gold pieces, overlooked or disdained by the burglars.

M. Fauvel, without taking the pains to make any examination, took a chair and bade his cashier be seated. He had become perfectly self-controlled and his face had resumed its customary expression.

"Now that we are alone, Prosper," he began, "have you nothing to tell me?"

The cashier started, as if that question could have surprised him.

"Nothing, monsieur," he said, "that I have not already told you."

"What! nothing? You persist in sticking to an absurd nonsensical fable that nobody will believe. It is sheer madness. Confide in me, that is your only salvation. I am your employer, it is true, but I am also and first of all your friend, your best friend. I can never forget that fifteen years ago you were placed in my care by your father, and that, from that day to this, I have only had occasion to praise your faithful and upright services. Yes, for fifteen years you have been with me. I was then just laying the foundations of the edifice of my fortune, and you have seen it rise, stone by stone, course by course. And as I have grown richer, I have striven to improve your position; for, young as you are, you are the oldest of my clerks in point of service. Every time the books have been balanced I have increased your salary."

Never had Prosper heard his employer express himself in such gentle, such fatherly tones. Profound amazement could be read upon his features.

"Tell me," continued M. Fauvel, "have I not always been like a father to you? From the very first day, my house was thrown open to you; I wished you to be one of my family. For a long time you lived like my own son, with my two sons and my niece Madeleine. But you wearied of that happy life. One day, about a year ago, you began to avoid us, and since then —"

The memories of the past, evoked by the banker, rushed madly into the unhappy cashier's mind; little by little he melted, and at last he burst into tears, hiding his face in his hands.

"A man can tell his father everything," resumed M. Fauvel, infected by Prosper's emotion; "have no fear. A father does not offer forgiveness, but oblivion. Do not I know the terrible temptations which may assail a young man in a city like Paris? There are desires which shatter the most firmly seated probity. There are hours of delirium and vertigo, when one is not one's self, when one acts like a madman, like a maniac, not having the consciousness of his acts, so to speak. Speak, Prosper, speak!"

"But what do you want me to tell you?"

"The truth. A genuinely honest man may stumble, but he rises again and redeems his error. Say to me: 'Yes, I was led on, dazzled; the sight of those piles of gold disturbed my reason; I am young, I have passions' —"

"I!" muttered Prosper, "I!"

"Poor child!" said the banker, sadly; "do you think that I know nothing of your life this last year, since you deserted my fireside? Don't you realize,

pray, that all your fellows are jealous of you, that they cannot forgive you for earning twelve thousand francs a year? You have not done a foolish thing that I have not been told of it by an anonymous letter. I could tell you the number of nights you have passed at play and the sums you have lost. Oh! envy has keen eyes and a sharp ear. I know what one ought to think of cowardly tale-bearing, but I have had to find out the truth. It is only right that I should know how the man lives to whom I intrust my fortune and my honor."

Prosper made a gesture of protest.

"Yes, my honor," M. Fauvel insisted, in a voice which indignation at the humiliation he had undergone made more vibrating; "yes, my credit, which might have been compromised to-day by that man. Do you know what the money that is to be paid M. de Clameran is going to cost me? And I might not have had the securities I have sacrificed; you didn't know that I had them!"

The banker paused, as if hoping for a confession, which did not come.

"Come, Prosper, courage — a good impulse! I am going away and you can examine the safe again; I will wager that in your excitement you didn't look carefully. I shall return to-night, and I am sure that during the day you will have found, if not the 300,000 francs, at least the greater part of that amount — and to-morrow neither you nor I will remember this false alarm."

M. Fauvel had already risen and was walking toward the door; Prosper caught his arm and detained him.

"Your generosity is of no avail, monsieur," he said in a bitter tone; "having taken nothing, I can

restore nothing. I have looked carefully, the bank-notes have been stolen."

"But by whom, poor fool? by whom?"

"Not by me, I swear by all I hold most sacred on earth!"

A wave of blood made the banker's face turn a deep purple.

"Villain!" he cried, "what do you mean? That it was done by me?"

Prosper hung his head and did not answer.

"Ah, you mean that!" cried M. Fauvel, no longer able to contain himself, "you dare! Then, the law shall decide between you and me, Monsieur Prosper Bertomy. God is my witness that I have done my best to save you. Blame no one but yourself for what is about to happen. I have requested the police inspector to be good enough to come here; he should be waiting in my office; shall I send for him?"

Prosper, with the ghastly gesture of resignation of the man who abandons hope, replied in a choking voice: —

"As you please!"

The banker was near the door; he opened it and after a last glance at his cashier, called to an office boy: —

"Anselme, ask the inspector to take the trouble to come down."

III

IF there is a man on earth whom no possible occurrence should have the power to excite or surprise, who is always on his guard against deceitful appearances, and is really to admit the possibility of anything and to find an explanation of anything, that

man is unquestionably a police inspector in Paris. While the magistrate on his bench adjusts the articles of the Code to the facts which are laid before him, the inspector observes and keeps close watch upon all the unpleasant facts which the law cannot reach. He is perforce in the secret of all the petty details of infamy, of domestic crimes, of ignominies endured under compulsion.

It may be that, when he entered upon his functions, he retained some illusions; after a year they have vanished. If he does not absolutely despise the human race, it is because he has often discovered, side by side with abominations assured of impunity, instances of sublime nobleness of heart which meet with no reward. It is because, even though he sees insolent knaves stealing public esteem, he finds consolation in thinking of the modest and obscure heroes whom he knows. His previsions have gone astray so many times that he has reached a condition of the most absolute scepticism. He believes in nothing, neither in absolute wickedness nor in absolute goodness, neither in virtue nor in vice. He has perforce arrived at the distressing conclusion that there are no men and women, but simply events.

Notified by the messenger, the inspector summoned by M. Fauvel soon appeared. He entered the office with a most tranquil, nay, a most indifferent air. A small man, dressed in black throughout, with a string tie around a paper collar of doubtful cleanliness, followed him.

The banker barely took the trouble to bow.

"Doubtless, monsieur," he began, "you have been informed of the painful circumstances which compel me to have recourse to your good offices?"

"There has been a robbery, I understand."

"Yes monsieur, a detestable, inexplicable robbery, committed in this office in which we now are, from the safe you see standing open yonder, to which my cashier" — and he pointed to Prosper — "alone had the pass-word and the key."

That assertion seemed to rouse the wretched cashier from his dull stupor.

"Excuse me, Monsieur le Commissaire," he said, in an almost inaudible voice, "my employer also had a key and the word."

"Of course, that goes without saying."

Thus at the outset the inspector knew where he stood. These two men evidently intended to accuse each other. By their very admissions, one of them, and nobody else, must be the culprit. And one was the head of a very considerable banking-house, the other a mere cashier. One was the employer, the other the employé.

But the inspector was far too well schooled in concealing his impressions to allow his exterior to betray aught of what was taking place in his mind. Not a muscle of his face stirred. He simply became more serious and scrutinized the cashier and M. Fauvel in turn, as if he hoped to draw some useful inference from their bearing, from their manner.

Prosper was still pale and as downcast as possible; he sat like a lifeless mass in his chair, and his arms hung limply by his sides. The banker, on the contrary, was standing, flushed, excited, with flashing eye, expressing himself with extraordinary vehemence.

"And the amount of the theft is enormous," continued M. Fauvel. "I have lost a fortune, 350,000 francs! The crime might have resulted most disastrously for me. There are times when the credit

of the wealthiest house may be endangered for lack of that amount."

"I should say as much — on a day when there is a large payment to make."

"Very true! and, as it happened, monsieur, I had a considerable payment to make to-day."

"Ah! indeed!"

There was no misunderstanding the inspector's meaning; a suspicion, the first, had crept into his mind. The banker understood him; he started as if he had been stung and continued very rapidly: —

"I have met my obligations, but at the cost of a very unpleasant sacrifice. I may add that, if my orders had been observed, the 350,000 francs would not have been in the safe."

"How so?"

"I do not like to have a large amount of money in my office over night. My cashier had orders always to wait until the last moment before sending to draw funds deposited in the Bank of France. I had especially and specifically forbidden him to keep money in the safe at night."

"You hear, monsieur?" said the official to Prosper.

"Yes, monsieur," the cashier replied; "what M. Fauvel says is perfectly true."

As a result of this explanation, the inspector's suspicion vanished.

"At all events," he said, "a robbery has been committed. By whom? Did the thief come from outside?"

The banker hesitated a moment.

"I do not think so," he replied at last.

"And I," declared Prosper, "am sure that he did not."

The inspector had led up to these replies and ex-

pected them. But it did not suit him to follow them forthwith to their consequences.

"Still," he observed, "we must provide for everything."

Turning to the man who accompanied him, he said: —

"Look about, M. Fanferlot, and see if you don't discover some indication that has escaped these gentlemen."

M. Fanferlot, *alias* The Squirrel, owes to an agility which savors of the marvellous, the sobriquet of which he is proud. Frail and insignificant in appearance, despite his muscles of steel, one who saw him buttoned to the chin in his scant black frock-coat would take him for a bailiff's sixth clerk. His is one of the faces which make you uneasy. His nose is disgustingly retroussé, he has thin lips and little round eyes of irritating mobility. Fanferlot has been employed on the detective force for five years and burns to distinguish himself, to make a name for himself; he is ambitious. Alas! he has always lacked opportunity — or genius.

Even before the inspector addressed him, he had been prying everywhere, examining the doors, tapping the partitions, scrutinizing the wicket, poking the ashes in the fireplace.

"It seems to me that it would be very hard for a stranger to get in here," he replied.

He made the circuit of the office.

"Is this door locked at night?" he asked.

"Always."

"And who keeps the key?"

"The messenger, to whom I hand it every night when I go away," Prosper replied.

"And the porter," added M. Fauvel, "sleeps in

the adjoining room on a cot-bed, which he puts down every night and folds up every morning."

"Is he here?" inquired the inspector.

"Yes, monsieur," the banker replied.

He at once opened the door and called: —

"Anselme!"

The messenger, a trusted employé, if such a person ever existed, had been ten years in M. Fauvel's service. He certainly was beyond suspicion, and he knew it; but the bare idea of a robbery is a terrible thing, and he was trembling like a leaf when he appeared.

"Did you sleep in the adjoining room last night?" the inspector asked him.

"Yes, monsieur, as usual."

"At what time did you go to bed?"

"About half-past ten; I had passed the evening at the café near by, with monsieur's *valet de chambre*."

"And you heard no noise during the night?"

"None! and yet I sleep so lightly that, if monsieur happens to come down to the counting-room when I am asleep, the sound of his footsteps wakes me."

"Does M. Fauvel come to the counting-room often in the night?"

"No, monsieur; on the contrary, very seldom."

"Did he come here last night?"

"No, monsieur; I am perfectly sure he did not, for I slept with one eye open, on account of the coffee I drank with his valet."

"Very good, my friend," said the inspector; "you may go."

When Anselme had retired, M. Fanferlot pursued his investigations. He had opened the door leading to the banker's narrow staircase.

"Where do these stairs lead?" he asked.

"To my private office," replied M. Fauvel.

"That was where I was taken when I arrived, was it not?" inquired the inspector.

"Precisely so."

"I must see it again," observed M. Fanferlot; "I should like to examine this exit."

"Nothing can be easier," said M. Fauvel, eagerly; "come, gentlemen, and you too, Prosper."

M. André Fauvel's private office consisted of two rooms: the waiting-room, handsomely decorated, and the office proper, of which the only furniture was an enormous desk, three or four leather-covered chairs, and a secretary and set of pigeon-holes on either side of the fireplace. These two rooms had but three doors: one leading to the secret stairway, another to the banker's bedroom, and the third to the hall and the main staircase; customers and callers were admitted through this third door.

M. Fanferlot took an inventory, at a glance, of the room where the desk was. He seemed annoyed, like a man who has flattered himself with the hope of finding some clew, but finds nothing.

"Let us look in the other room," he said; and he at once passed through into the waiting-room, followed by the banker and the inspector.

Prosper was left alone in the office. The confusion of his ideas was so great that he could not understand that his situation was growing worse from moment to moment. He had sought, he had accepted the contest with his employer, the contest was fairly engaged, and henceforth it was not in his power to stay it or to arrest its consequences. They were to fight without truce or quarter, using every weapon that came to hand, until one of the two should succumb and pay for his defeat with his honor.

In the eyes of the law which would be innocent? Alas! the unhappy cashier realized only too well how unequal the chances were, and the consciousness of his inferiority overwhelmed him. Never, no, never, had he believed that his employer would carry out his threat. For, after all, in a prosecution like that which was about to begin, M. Fauvel had as much to risk, and much more to lose, than his clerk.

Sitting in an armchair near the fireplace, he was absorbed in the gloomiest reflections, when the door of the banker's bedroom opened.

A remarkably lovely young woman appeared in the doorway. She was tall and slender, and her morning gown, caught in above her hips by a silk cord, revealed all the perfection of her figure. She was dark, with great brown eyes; her skin had the soft, uniform pallor of the flower of the white camellia, and her beautiful black hair, still in disorder, escaping from the frail tortoise-shell comb which confined it, fell in profusion, in clusters of curls, about her exquisitely shaped neck. It was that niece of M. André Fauvel whom he had mentioned a few moments before, — Madeleine.

When she spied Prosper Bertomy in that office, where she had probably expected to find her uncle alone, she could not restrain an exclamation of surprise, —

“Oh!”

Prosper, for his part, had risen as if he had received an electric shock. His eyes, but now so utterly lifeless, gleamed as if he had caught a glimpse of a messenger of hope.

“Madeleine!” he exclaimed; “Madeleine!”

The girl turned a brighter red than a poppy. She seemed at first inclined to withdraw, and even stepped

back; but, when Prosper walked toward her, an impulse stronger than her will arrested her and she offered him her hand, which he took and pressed respectfully. They stood thus face to face, motionless, embarrassed, so deeply moved that they both hung their heads, afraid of the meeting of their eyes, and having so many things to say to each other that they knew not where to begin, so held their peace.

At last Madeleine murmured in a hardly audible voice: —

“You, Prosper, you!”

Those few words broke the charm. The cashier dropped the white hand he held, and replied in the bitterest tone imaginable: —

“Yes, it is really Prosper, your companion in childhood, to-day suspected, accused of a most infamous and most shameless robbery,—Prosper, whom your uncle has just turned over to the officers of justice, and who, before the end of the day, will be arrested and thrown into prison.”

Madeleine made a gesture of the most sincere dismay, her eyes expressed profoundest compassion.

“Great God!” she cried, “what do you mean?”

“What! mademoiselle, is it possible that you do not know? Have your aunt or your cousins told you nothing?”

“Nothing. I have hardly seen my cousins this morning, and my aunt is feeling so ill that I was anxious, and came here after my uncle. But in Heaven’s name, tell me, what has happened to you?”

The cashier hesitated. It may be that he had an idea of opening his heart to Madeleine, of disclosing his most secret thoughts; but a memory of the past flashed through his mind and stayed the disclosure on his lips. He shook his head sadly and said: —

"Thanks, mademoiselle, for this proof of interest, — the last, I presume, that I shall receive from you; but allow me, by holding my peace, to spare you a pang, to spare myself the grief of blushing before you."

Madeleine interrupted him with an imperious gesture.

"I insist upon knowing," she said.

"Alas! mademoiselle," the cashier replied, "you will learn only too soon of my misfortune and my shame; and then, yes, then you will congratulate yourself on what you have done."

She attempted to insist; instead of ordering, she implored, but Prosper's mind was made up.

"Your uncle is in the next room, mademoiselle," he said, "with the police inspector and a detective; they will return in a moment; in Heaven's name go, do not let them see you."

As he spoke he pushed her gently, although she resisted a little, and he succeeded in closing the door.

It was time, for the inspector and M. Fauvel returned. They had inspected the waiting-room and main stairway, and had heard nothing of what had taken place in the office. But Fanferlot had heard for them. That excellent bloodhound had not lost sight of the cashier. He had said to himself: "He will think he's alone, his face will speak; I shall detect a smile, a wink, which will give me some light."

So, leaving M. Fauvel and the inspector to pursue their investigations, he had stationed himself to watch. He had seen the door open and Madeleine come in; he had lost neither a gesture nor a word of the brief scene between Prosper and the young woman.

To be sure, that scene amounted to nothing;

behind each sentence one could divine something left unsaid; but M. Fanferlot was clever enough to supply whatever must be understood. He had only a suspicion as yet, but it was a suspicion, a hypothesis, a something, a starting-point. Indeed, it seemed to him, he is naturally so prompt to construct his whole plan upon the most trivial incident, that he could detect a drama in the past lives of these people whom he did not know.

It is a fact that while the police inspector is a sceptic, the detective is a believer: he believes in evil.

"This is how it is," he thought: "the young man loves this girl, who is very pretty, on my word; and, as he is very good-looking himself, she loves him in return. Their love for each other has annoyed the banker, — I can understand that; and, as he did n't know how to get rid of this embarrassing lover by fair means, he has thought up this charge of robbery, which is ingenious enough."

Thus, in M. Fanferlot's opinion, the banker had simply robbed himself, and the innocent cashier was the victim of a most detestable plot. But this conviction on the detective's part was not destined to profit Prosper, for the moment at all events. Fanferlot, the ambitious man, who longs to succeed, who is hungry for renown, had definitely decided to keep his conjectures to himself.

"I will just let the others go ahead," he said to himself, "and I will go on alone, in my own way. When, hereafter, by dint of constant watching, of patient investigation, I have collected the elements of a triumphant conviction, then I will unmask the knave."

However, he was radiant. At last he had fallen in with the crime he had sought so long, which was to

make him famous. Nothing was wanting, neither the infamous circumstances nor the mystery nor the romantic and sentimental element, supplied by Prosper and Madeleine. To succeed seemed difficult, almost impossible; but Fanferlot, *alias* The Squirrel, is full of confidence in his genius for investigation.

Meanwhile the inspection of the upper floor was concluded, and they had returned to Prosper's office. The inspector, who was so calm at his first appearance, became more and more thoughtful. The moment approached when the decisive step must be taken, and he was hesitating—that could easily be seen.

"You see, messieurs," he began, "our investigations have simply confirmed our previous impressions."

M. Fauvel and the cashier made the same gesture of assent.

"And what is your opinion, M. Fanferlot?" continued the inspector.

The detective did not reply. He was engaged in examining the lock of the safe with a microscope, and displayed the most manifest symptoms of surprise. Evidently he had made some discovery of the utmost importance.

Moved, apparently, by the same impulse, M. Fauvel, Prosper, and the inspector hastily rose and surrounded the detective.

"Have you found some clew?" queried the banker.

Fanferlot turned with a vexed expression. He blamed himself for not being able to conceal his feelings more effectually.

"Oh!" he said carelessly, "it's a very trivial thing that I happened to notice."

"Nevertheless, we should like to know—" Prosper began.

"I have simply obtained proof that this safe has been quite recently opened or closed, I don't know which, with considerable violence and great haste."

"How so?" queried the inspector, deeply interested.

"Look, monsieur, do you see this scratch on the door, starting from the lock?"

The inspector took the magnifying-glass, stooped, and in his turn examined the safe long and carefully. It was easy enough to see a long vertical scratch which had scraped off the varnish for some twelve or fifteen centimetres.

"I see," said the inspector; "but what does that prove?"

"Oh! nothing at all," said Fanferlot; "that is just what I said."

This scratch — recently made, that was, undeniable — had in his eyes a meaning which escaped the others; in it he found a confirmation of his suspicions. He said to himself that the cashier, though he had taken millions, had no reason whatever to hurry. The banker, on the other hand, coming down at night, walking softly for fear of waking the man in the adjoining room, and intending to plunder his own safe, had a thousand reasons for trembling, for making haste, for hurriedly removing the key, which had marred the varnish as it slipped out of the lock.

Determined to disentangle alone the tangled skein of this affair, the detective of course kept his conjectures to himself, just as he said nothing of the interview he had overheard between Madeleine and Prosper. Furthermore, he busied himself in making the others forget the incident so far as he could.

"To conclude," he continued, addressing the inspector, "I declare that no stranger could have made his way in here. Moreover, the safe is perfectly

intact. No undue pressure has been applied to the movable buttons. I can say positively that no tools have been used on the lock; not so much as a tooth-pick has been inserted in it. Whoever opened it knew the word and had the key."

This positive assertion on the part of a man whom he knew to be a shrewd officer put an end to the inspector's hesitation.

"That makes my duty clear," he said; "it only remains for me now to request a moment's interview with M. Fauvel."

"I am at your service, monsieur," said the banker.

Prosper understood; he ostentatiously placed his hat in full sight on a table, as if to signify that he had no idea of absconding, and walked into the next office.

Fanferlot also left the counting-room, but the inspector had had time to make him a sign, which the others did not see, and which he answered. The sign signified: "You are responsible to me for that man."

The detective did not require that incentive to keep Prosper under close surveillance. His suspicions were too vague, his longing to succeed too keen, for him to consent to lose sight of the cashier, to cease to study him. That is why, after following Prosper into the next office, he took up his position on a bench at the farther end of the room, in the shadow, and seemed to try to find a comfortable position, turning this way and that and yawning as if he would dislocate his jaws. At last he closed his eyes.

Prosper meanwhile had taken his place at the desk of one of the clerks who was temporarily absent. The others burned to know the result of the sum-

mary investigation, and the most intense curiosity shone in their eyes, yet they dared not ask any questions.

At last little Cavaillon, the cashier's defender, was unable to restrain himself and took the risk.

"Well?" he ventured to say.

Prosper shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know," was his reply.

Was it due to consciousness of innocence, certainty of impunity, or indifference as to the result? The clerks noticed with the utmost amazement that the cashier had resumed his accustomed demeanor, that sort of frigid haughtiness which keeps people at a distance, and which had made him so many enemies in the house.

Of his emotion, but a moment before so great that it was pitiful to see, he had retained no other traces than an increased pallor, a darker circle around his inflamed eyes, and the dishevelled condition of his hair, still damp with the cold sweat of terror. No stranger entering the room would have suspected that the young man who sat there carelessly playing with a pencil was charged with theft and was about to be arrested.

Soon, however, he ceased to play with the pencil he held; he drew a sheet of paper toward him and hastily wrote a few lines.

"Aha!" thought Fanferlot, *alias* The Squirrel, whose eyes and ears worked with marvellous acuteness despite his profound slumber, "aha! so we confide in paper, do we? at last we are going to learn something definite."

His brief letter written, Prosper folded it carefully, reducing it to the smallest possible compass, and after a stealthy glance at the detective, who sat

motionless in his corner, he tossed it to little Cavailon with the single word, —

“Gypsy!”

All this was done with such perfect self-possession, so rapidly, with such rare address, that Fanferlot — a connoisseur — was thunderstruck, confounded, and in truth a little disturbed.

“The deuce!” he said to himself; “for an innocent man my youngster has a deal of stomach and nerve, more than many of my old customers. That’s what comes of education, though.”

Yes, innocent or guilty, Prosper must have been endowed with a most robust and energetic spirit to assume that air of imperturbable tranquillity, to display such presence of mind; for at that very moment his fate, his future, his honor, his life, were being decided on the other side of the partition. And he was thirty years old!

Before acting, the police inspector, whether from natural deference or in the hope of procuring some new light from a more private conversation, had made it a point to warn the banker.

“Doubt is no longer possible, monsieur,” he said as soon as they were alone “it was that young man who robbed you. I should fall short of my duty if I did not make sure of his person provisionally; the prosecuting attorney’s office will afterward release him or confirm the arrest.”

This statement seemed to move the banker strangely.

“Poor Prosper!” he muttered.

Observing his companion’s astonishment, he added: —

“Until to-day, monsieur, I have had the most absolute confidence in his probity; I would have intrusted my whole fortune to him without hesitation. I

almost went on my knees to him to induce him to confess to a momentary betrayal of confidence, promising to forgive and forget; I could not move him. I loved him, and even now, despite the trouble and humiliation which I anticipate, I cannot find it in my heart to hate him."

The inspector seemed not to understand.

"What?" he asked; "humiliation?"

"Why, monsieur," said M. Fauvel, excitedly, "should not the law be, is it not the same to all? Because I am the head of a large establishment, while he is only a clerk, does it follow that my word will be believed? Why should I not have robbed myself? Such things have been known. I shall be asked for all the facts, I shall be obliged to lay before a magistrate the exact position of my business, to explain all my affairs to him, to disclose the secrets and the mechanism of all my operations."

"It is true, monsieur, that some explanations may be required, but your well-known uprightness —"

"Alas! he too was upright. Who would have been suspected, if I could not have raised a hundred thousand crowns this morning on the instant? Who would be suspected hereafter if I should fail to prove that my available assets exceed my liabilities by more than three millions?"

For every man of heart the idea, the possibility, the mere appearance of a suspicion is a cause of keenest suffering; the banker suffered, and the inspector saw that he did.

"Have no fear, monsieur," he said; "within the week justice will have collected sufficient proofs to establish the guilt of yonder wretch, whom we may now recall."

Prosper, on being summoned, returned with M.

Fanferlot, whom they had had much difficulty in waking; and he listened to the announcement of his arrest without a tremor, with every indication of the most complete insensibility. He replied simply, without the slightest emphasis: —

"I swear that I am innocent!"

M. Fauvel, who was much more disturbed than his cashier, made one last effort.

"There is still time, my son," he said; "in Heaven's name, reflect."

Prosper did not seem to hear him. He took from his pocket a small key, which he placed on the mantel.

"Here's the key to your safe, monsieur," he said. "I hope for my sake that you will find out some day that I have taken nothing from you; for your sake, I hope that you will not find it out too late."

Then, as nobody spoke, he continued: —

"Before I go, here are the books, papers, and lists necessary for my successor, whoever he may be. I ought further to inform you that I leave a deficit here, without counting the 350,000 francs."

Deficit! That word, always ominous in the mouth of a cashier, burst like a shell in the ears of Prosper's auditors. His statement, however, was interpreted in several very different ways.

"A deficit!" thought the inspector; "how, after this, can there be any doubt of this young man's guilt? Before plundering the safe by wholesale, he worked his hand in by petty pilferings."

"A deficit!" said the detective to himself; "now, if we would doubt the poor devil's innocence, we must give him credit for an impossible degree of infernal premeditation; if guilty, he would certainly have restored the money he had previously taken."

But the explanation which Prosper proceeded to give greatly diminished both the significance and the seriousness of the fact.

"I am short thirty-five hundred francs," he said, "which amount is made up thus: two thousand francs which I have taken myself in anticipation of my salary, and fifteen hundred advanced to several of my colleagues. This is the last day of the month, the salaries are payable to-morrow, and so—"

The inspector interrupted him.

"Were you authorized," he asked sternly, "to draw on your cash according to your necessities, and to make advances?"

"No; but it is certain that M. Fauvel would not have refused to allow me to accommodate my comrades. What I have done is done everywhere; I have simply followed my predecessor's example."

The banker nodded his head in assent.

"So far as my personal account is concerned," continued the cashier, "I had in a certain sense the right to do what I have done, as all my savings, some fifteen thousand francs, are invested in the house."

"That is quite true," assented M. Fauvel; "M. Bertomy has at least as much as that in my hands."

This last incident being thrashed out, the inspector's mission was at an end, his summary inquiry was closed. He announced that he was about to withdraw, and ordered the cashier to prepare to accompany him.

Ordinarily the moment when the brutal reality stands out undisguised, when a man feels that he no longer belongs to himself, that his liberty has vanished,—ordinarily that is a frightful moment.

At that fateful command, "Follow me!" which opens the prison doors, so to speak, the most

heedless and hardened give way, shed tears and pray for mercy.

But Prosper lost nothing of the studied indifference which he had assumed, and which the inspector mentally called extraordinary impudence. Slowly, with as much tranquillity and ease of manner as if he were simply making ready to breakfast with a friend, he put on his overcoat, repaired the disorder of his hair, took his gloves and said: —

“I am ready to accompany you, monsieur.”

The inspector had already closed his satchel and bowed to M. Fauvel.

“Let us be off!” he said.

They left the room, and the banker, downcast and melancholy, his eyes wet with tears which he could not restrain, watched them depart.

“*Mon Dieu!*” he muttered, “I would willingly have been robbed of twice as much if I could have continued to esteem my poor Prosper and keep him with me as in the old days.”

It was Fanferlot, the man whose ears were always open, who heard and noted that sentence, and, prompt to suspect, too much inclined to attribute to others a supply of astuteness equal to his own, he was not very far removed from the belief that it had been said for him to hear. He was the last to leave the office, pretending to look for an umbrella which he had never had, and he withdrew with calculated moderation, after remarking several times that he would return to see if somebody had not found it.

Strictly speaking, it was his duty to take charge of Prosper and take him to prison; but as they were about to leave he had approached the inspector, and, in the interest of the investigation, had requested and obtained liberty of action.

The note written by Prosper, that note which he could feel in little Cavaillon's pocket, was uppermost in his thoughts. And when he returned to the cashier's office, he had taken pains to leave the door ajar, spying out of the corner of his eye, ready to jump at the young clerk's slightest movement. To obtain possession of that written evidence, which was sure to be important, might seem to be the simplest thing in the world. But what was he to do? Simply arrest Cavaillon, frighten him, demand the note, and, if necessary, take it from him by force? The detective thought for a moment of doing that. Yes, but to what would that lead? To nothing, or at most to an incomplete and indefinite result.

Fanferlot was persuaded that the note was intended, not for the young clerk, but for some third person. If assailed in that way, would Cavaillon disclose the identity of that person, who could not very well bear the name mentioned by the cashier, "Gypsy"? And, taking the most hopeful view of the case, if he should speak, would he not lie?

After mature reflection the detective decided, in his police-officer's wisdom, that it would be childish to ask to be told a secret when one could discover it. To watch Cavaillon, to follow him, to catch him in the act so clearly that he could not deny it, was mere sport. Moreover, this method of procedure was much more in the line of the employé of the bureau on Rue de Jerusalem, who is naturally sly and silent, and professionally averse to noise, publicity, anything that resembles violence.

Fanferlot's plan was irrevocably formed when he arrived in the vestibule. There he adroitly drew a messenger into conversation, and after four or five questions apparently utterly purposeless, he

obtained certain information that the Fauvel establishment had no exit on Rue de la Victoire, and that the clerks could go in and out only by the main door on Rue de Provence.

Thenceforth the task he had imposed upon himself offered not the shadow of a difficulty. He hurriedly crossed the street, and stationed himself under a porte-cochère opposite. His post of observation was admirably chosen. Not only could he watch all the going and coming to and from the banking-house, but he was also where he could see all the windows. By standing on tiptoe he could distinguish Cavaillon bending over his desk.

Fanferlot remained a long while at his post. But he is naturally patient, and it has happened many times that he has lain in wait whole days and nights for an affair of less interest. Nor, indeed, had he leisure to be bored. He weighed the value of his discoveries, calculated his chances, and built the edifice of his fortune upon his triumph, as Perrette built his upon the sale of his milk-jar.

At last, about one o'clock, the detective saw Cavaillon rise, exchange his office coat for his street coat, and take up his hat.

"Good!" he said to himself, "the fellow's coming out; we must keep our eyes open."

A moment later Cavaillon did in fact appear at the door of the banking-house. But, before stepping down to the sidewalk, he looked to right and left; he hesitated.

"Can he suspect anything?" thought Fanferlot.

No, the young clerk suspected nothing; but, having an errand to do, and fearing lest his absence might be noticed, he was considering which was the shortest road to take. He soon made up his mind;

he made for Faubourg Montmartre and followed it to Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette. He walked very fast, paying little heed to the muttering of the people he jostled, and the detective almost found it hard to follow him.

Arriving at Rue Chaptal, Cavaillon turned sharply and entered the house numbered 39.

He had taken barely three steps in the rather narrow hall when, feeling a hand on his shoulder, he turned suddenly and found himself face to face with Fanferlot. He recognized him perfectly, so perfectly that he turned pale as death and stepped back, looking about for a chance to escape. But the detective had anticipated the temptation; he barred the passage absolutely. Cavaillon saw that he was caught.

"What do you want of me?" he demanded in a voice choked by fear.

The qualities which above all others distinguish M. Fanferlot, *alias* The Squirrel, from his confrères are his exquisite gentleness and his unequalled urbanity. Even with his "customers" his demeanor is unexceptionable and he collars people and locks them up with the utmost consideration and the most obsequious formulæ of civility.

"You will deign, I trust, my dear monsieur," he replied, "to pardon the very great liberty I take, but I shall have to rely upon your courtesy for a little information."

"Information from me?"

"Yes, my dear monsieur, from you, Monsieur Eugène Cavaillon."

"But I don't know you."

"Oh! yes, you do; you saw me very plainly this morning. Besides, it's a most trivial matter, and if you will do me the honor to accept my arm and go

into the street with me a moment, you will overwhelm me."

What was there to do? Cavaillon took M. Fanferlot's arm and went out with him.

Rue Chaptal is not one of those noisy, crowded streets where the carriages are a constant source of peril to the pedestrian. There are but two or three shops on the street, and from the corner of Rue Fontaine, where there is a druggist, to a point opposite Rue Léonie, is a high, frowning wall, pierced here and there by small windows which furnish light for cabinet-makers' shops.

It is one of those streets where one can talk comfortably without being obliged to step off the sidewalk every moment, and M. Fanferlot and Cavaillon were in no danger of being interrupted by passers-by.

"Here are the facts, my dear monsieur," the detective began: "M. Prosper Bertomy very dexterously tossed you a little note this morning."

Cavaillon had a vague idea that that note was at the bottom of the affair; he had exerted himself to be prepared, to be on his guard.

"You are mistaken," he replied, flushing to his ears.

"I beg your pardon! believe me, I should be very sorry to contradict you, but I am sure of what I state."

"I assure you that Prosper handed me nothing."

"I beg you, do not deny it, my dear monsieur," persisted Fanferlot; "you will compel me to prove to you that four clerks saw him toss you a note written in pencil and folded very small."

The young clerk realized that to cling to his denial in the face of one so well informed would be mere folly; so he changed his tactics.

"Well, yes," he said, "it is true; I did receive a

note from Prosper; but it was for my own eyes alone, I tore it up and threw the pieces into the fire after I had read it."

That might very well be the truth. Fanferlot was afraid of it, but how could he make sure? He remembered that the most commonplace tricks are those which succeed best, and, trusting in his star, he said boldly:—

"I will take the liberty of observing, my dear monsieur, that that is not strictly true; the note was given you to be handed to Gypsy."

A gesture of despair on Cavaillon's part told the detective that he was not mistaken; he breathed freely once more.

"I swear, monsieur," began the young clerk.

"Do not swear, my dear monsieur," Fanferlot interrupted him; "all the oaths in the world will do no good. Not only did you not tear up that note, but you went into yonder house to hand it to whoever is entitled to it, and you have it in your pocket."

"No, monsieur, no!"

M. Fanferlot did not notice this denial, but continued in his softest voice:—

"And that note you are going to be good-natured enough, I am convinced, to give to me; be sure that, if it were not absolutely necessary—"

"Never!" replied Cavaillon. And, deeming the moment favorable, he tried by means of a violent jerk to release his arm, which was passed through Fanferlot's, and to make his escape. But he had his trouble for his pains; the detective is as strong as he is gentle.

"Look out and not hurt yourself, my young monsieur," said he, "and take my advice and give me the note."

"I have n't it!"

"Oh! nonsense! you will surely force me to painful extremities. Do you know what will happen if you are obstinate? I shall call two police officers who will take an arm each and escort you before the inspector, and, once there, I shall have the painful duty of searching you whether you will or no. So, you see, you really distress me."

Cavaillon was certainly devoted to Prosper, but it was made as clear as day to him that a struggle would lead to nothing, that he would not even have time to destroy the *corpus delicti*. To give up the note under such circumstances was not to betray his trust: he resigned himself to his fate, cursing his helplessness, almost weeping with rage.

"You are the stronger," he said: "I obey."

As he spoke, he took from his wallet the ill-fated note and handed it to the detective.

Fanferlot's hands trembled with glee as he unfolded the paper, and yet, faithful to his habit of painstaking politeness, he bowed to Cavaillon when it was open, murmuring:—

"You will excuse me, will you not, my dear monsieur? I am really distressed at my own discourtesy."

At last he read:—

DEAR NINA, — If you love me, obey me at once, without a moment's hesitation, without reflection. On receipt of this line, take everything you have of your own in the house—*absolutely everything*—and take lodgings in some furnished house at the other end of Paris. Do not show yourself; disappear as completely as you can. It may be that my life depends on your obedience. I am accused of a considerable theft and I am about to be arrested. There must be five hundred francs in the secretary; take them. Leave your address with Cavaillon, who will explain what I cannot tell

you now. Keep up your courage, and *au revoir* for a little while.

PROSPER.

Had he been less dismayed himself, Cavaillon might have detected on the detective's face the indications of unbounded disappointment. Fanferlot had cradled himself in the hope that he was about to obtain possession of a very important document, and — who knows? — perhaps of an irrefutable proof of Prosper's innocence or guilt. Instead of that, he had seized a lover's letter, the letter of one who was less anxious for himself than for his beloved.

In vain did he cudgel his brain, he could discover no precise, definite meaning in that letter. It proved nothing, either for or against the man who wrote it. The two words *absolutely everything* were underlined, it is true, but they might be interpreted in so many ways!

However, the detective thought it was his duty to continue.

"This Madame Nina Gypsy is a friend of M. Prosper Bertomy, no doubt?" he said.

"She is his mistress."

"Ah! and she lives here, at number 39?"

"You know that she does, as you saw me go in."

"I did suspect as much, my dear monsieur; and tell me if the apartment she occupies is hired in her name."

"No, she lives with Prosper."

"Exactly. And on what floor, please?"

"The first."

M. Fanferlot had carefully folded the note in the original folds, and slipped it into his pocket.

"A thousand thanks, my dear monsieur," he said, "for your kind information; in exchange, I will, if

you please, save you the trouble you were about to take."

"Monsieur!"

"Yes, with your permission, I will myself hand this letter to Madame Nina Gypsy."

Cavaillon tried to resist, he tried to argue, but M. Fanferlot was in a hurry and cut him short.

"I am going to venture to give you what I deem to be good advice, my dear monsieur," he said. "In your place, I would very quietly return to my desk, and I would not meddle in this business any more—no, not any more at all!"

"But, monsieur, Prosper has been my protector; he rescued me from poverty, he is my friend."

"An additional reason why you should keep quiet. Can you help him? Not at all, can you? Very well; but let me tell you that you can injure him. Everybody knows that you are devoted to him,—will not your absence be noticed? If you make yourself active in the matter, if you take steps which amount to nothing, will they not be misinterpreted?"

"Prosper is innocent; I am sure of it."

That was Fanferlot's firm conviction; but it did not suit him to allow his inmost thoughts to be divined; and yet, in the interest of his future investigations, it was advisable for him to impose prudence and discretion upon the young clerk. He would have liked to urge him to say nothing as to what had taken place between them; but he dared not.

"What you say is quite possible," he replied, "and I hope for M. Bertomy's sake that it is true. I hope it most of all for your sake; for, if he is guilty, you will inevitably be questioned, in view of your well-known intimacy, and it may be that you will be suspected of complicity."

Cavaillon hung his head; he was terror-stricken.

"So take my advice, my dear monsieur," continued Fanferlot; "go back to your business and — *au revoir* till we meet again."

The poor boy obeyed. Slowly and with a very heavy heart he returned to Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette. He asked himself how he could help Prosper, how warn Madame Gypsy, — above all, how revenge himself on that hateful police agent who had humiliated him so cruelly.

As soon as he had disappeared around the corner of the street, Fanferlot entered the house, tossed the concierge the name of Prosper Bertomy, went upstairs and rang at the door of the first-floor suite. A servant of some fifteen years, wearing a jaunty livery, opened the door.

"Madame Nina Gypsy?" he said inquiringly.

The little groom hesitated; seeing which M. Fanferlot showed his letter.

"I am instructed by M. Prosper," he said, "to hand madame this note, and wait for her reply."

"Come in, then, and I will go and tell madame."

Prosper's name had produced its effect. Fanferlot was ushered into a little salon, hung with curtains of silk damask with heavy dark-blue hold-backs and gilt ornaments. There were triple curtains at the windows, and portières at all the doors. A sumptuous carpet covered the floor.

"The deuce!" muttered the detective, "our cashier is well housed."

But he had no time to continue his inventory; one of the portières was raised and Madame Nina Gypsy appeared.

Madame Nina Gypsy is, or, to speak more accurately, was at this time a very young woman, slender,

delicate, frail, dark, or rather of a golden complexion, like the quadroons of Havana, with the feet and hands of a child. Long, drooping, silky eyelashes tempered the too vivid gleam of her great black eyes; her lips, which were a little too thick, smiled over teeth whiter than the teeth of a cat, tiny, gleaming, pearly teeth, sharp enough to consume ten patrimonies.

She was not yet dressed and was shivering in an ample velvet peignoir, through all the apertures of which protruded the fluffy lace of her night-dress. But she had already passed through the hands of a hair-dresser or of a very skilful maid. Her hair was crimped and curled all about her forehead, kept in place by bands of red velvet, and piled up in an enormous towering *chignon* at the back.

She was fascinating thus, and so insolent, so defiant in her beauty, that Fanferlot was dazzled and at first dumfounded.

"*Saperlotte!*" he said to himself, thinking of Madeleine's noble and stately beauty, of which he had caught a glimpse a few hours earlier, "he has good taste, has our cashier, very good taste,—too good taste."

While he reflected thus, slightly crestfallen, wondering how he should begin the interview, Madame Gypsy eyed him from head to foot with a most disdainful expression, amazed beyond measure to see in her salon this seedy, out-at-elbows person, with a greasy hat patched up with a band of crape.

Having creditors, she tried to remember what one of them was likely to cut such a shabby figure, or what one would presume to send this clown to wipe his down-at-the heel shoes on her superfine carpets.

"What do you want?" she asked when her scru-

tiny was concluded, screwing up her eyes in a most impertinent grimace.

Any other than Fanferlot would have taken offence at her words and her tone; but he paid no attention to them except to form from them some notions concerning the young woman's character.

"She's not good-natured," he thought, "and she has n't the slightest education."

He was slow about answering, and Madame Nina stamped impatiently.

"Will you speak?" said she; "what do you want?"

"I was told, dear madame," said the detective, in his softest and most humble tone, "to hand you a little note from M. Bertomy."

"From Prosper? — You know him then?"

"I have that honor, and indeed, if I may venture to say so, I am a friend of his."

"Monsieur!" exclaimed Madame Gypsy, wounded in her self-esteem.

M. Fanferlot did not deign to notice this insulting exclamation. He is ambitious and scorn runs off him like water off a duck's back.

"I said that I am his friend," he persisted; "and few persons, I am quite sure, would have the courage to avow their friendship for him now."

The detective spoke in such a serious, earnest tone that Madame Gypsy was impressed.

"I have never been good at guessing riddles," she said sharply; "what do you mean to insinuate, if you please?"

The man from the prefecture slowly took from his pocket the letter he had taken from Cavaillon, and said, handing it to Madame Gypsy: —

"Read this."

She certainly had no presentiment of misfortune. Although she had the best eyes in the world, she adjusted a dainty eye-glass on her nose before unfolding the note. At a glance she read it through. She turned very white at first, then very red; a nervous tremor shook her from head to foot; her legs trembled; she staggered. Fanferlot, thinking that she was going to fall, put out his arms to catch her.

Useless precaution! Madame Gypsy was one of those women whose heedless indolence conceals a satanic energy, fragile creatures whose power of resistance knows no bounds; like cats in their graceful and dainty ways, and most of all in their nerves and muscles of steel. The dizziness caused by the blow she had received lasted as long as the lightning-flash. She staggered, but she did not fall. She stood erect once more, stronger than ever, grasped the detective's wrists, and squeezing them in her tiny fingers until she almost made him cry out, she exclaimed: —

"Explain yourself; what does this mean? Do you know what this letter tells me?"

Brave as he is, — and he faces the most dangerous criminals every day, — Fanferlot was almost afraid of Madame Nina's anger.

"Alas!" he murmured.

"They propose to arrest Prosper; they accuse him of stealing?"

"Yes, they claim that he has taken 350,000 francs from his safe."

"It is false!" cried the young woman; "it is abominable and absurd!"

She had released Fanferlot's wrists, and her rage, the typical rage of a spoiled child, vented itself in frantic gesticulation. Oh! she paid but little heed

to her lovely peignoir and her magnificent laces, which she rumbled pitilessly.

"Prosper steal!" she cried, "that would be too idiotic. Steal! what would he steal for? Has n't he a large fortune?"

"But you see, my dear lady," said the detective, "they say that M. Bertomy is not rich, that he has nothing but his salary to live on."

This reply seemed to confound all Madame Gypsy's ideas.

"But," she insisted, "he has always seemed to have a lot of money. Not rich? — why, then —"

She dared not finish, but her eyes met Fanferlot's, and they understood each other.

Madame Nina's glance said: —

"Then it was for me, for my comfort, to gratify my caprices, that he stole the money?"

"Perhaps!" the detective's glance replied.

But ten seconds of reflection restored the young woman's first confidence. The doubt which had touched her mind with the tip of its wing flew away.

"No," she cried, "no, Prosper never would have stolen a sou for me, worse luck. One can understand and explain a cashier's burying his hands in the money intrusted to his honor, for the sake of a woman he loves; but Prosper does n't love me, he never did love me."

"Oh! my dear lady!" protested the gallant and courteous Fanferlot, "you do not mean what you say."

She shook her head sadly; a tear which she could hardly hold back dimmed the lustre of her lovely eyes.

"I do mean it," she replied, "and it is true. He is ready to anticipate all my whims, you will say.

What does that prove? When I say that he does n't love me, I am only too well convinced of it, and I know what I am talking about. Once in my life I was loved by a man of heart, and by what I have suffered this last year I can understand how unhappy I made him. I am nothing at all in Prosper's life, barely an accident — "

"But in that case, why — "

"Oh! yes," Madame Gypsy interrupted, "why, indeed? You will be very clever if you can tell me. For a whole year now I have been vainly seeking an answer to that question, — a terrible question to me — and I am a woman! Let me see you guess the thoughts of a man who is so thoroughly master of himself that nothing of what is going on in his heart ever gets into his eyes. I have watched him as a woman can watch the man on whom her destiny depends, — time and trouble wasted! He is kind, he is gentle, but he gives you no handle. If you think he is weak, you make a mistake. He's a bar of steel painted like a reed, is that fair-haired fellow."

Carried away by the violence of her feelings, Madame Nina laid bare the very bottom of her heart. She was unsuspecting, having no reason to mistrust the identity of this man who was listening to her, who was a stranger to her, but in whom she saw a friend of Prosper.

For his part Fanferlot mentally congratulated himself on his good-fortune and his adroitness. There is nothing equal to a woman for drawing a striking likeness. In a moment of excitement she had given him the most valuable information; he knew now what manner of man he had to deal with, which is the most essential point in an investigation.

"They say," he rejoined tentatively, "that M. Bertomy is a gambler, and gambling carries a man a long way."

Madame Gypsy shrugged her shoulders.

"Yes, it is true," she replied; "he does gamble. I have seen him gain or lose considerable sums without a quiver. He gambles, but he's not a gambler. He plays cards as he sups, as he gets tipsy, as he makes love, without passion, without enthusiasm, without enjoyment. Sometimes he frightens me; it seems to me as if he were dragging about a body in which there is no soul. Oh! I am not happy, I tell you! I have never discovered anything in him but the most profound indifference, carried so far that it has often seemed to me to be despair. And the idea that that man has stolen money! Nonsense! Look you, you can't make me believe that there is n't something terrible in his life, a secret, a great misfortune, I don't know what — but something."

"And he has never mentioned his past to you?"

"He! why, did n't you hear what I said? I tell you he does n't love me."

Emotion overcame Madame Nina little by little. She wept, and great tears rolled silently down her cheeks. But it was only a moment of despair. Soon she drew herself up, her eyes aflame with the most generous resolutions.

"But I love him!" she cried, "and it is for me to save him. Ah! I shall know how to talk to his employer, the wretch who accuses him, and to the judges and to the whole world. He is arrested; I will prove that he's innocent. Come, monsieur, let us go, and I promise you that before night either he will be free or I will be a prisoner with him."

Madame Gypsy's project was assuredly most laud-

able, and dictated by the noblest sentiments; unhappily, it was impracticable. Moreover, it had the disadvantage of running counter to the detective's intention.

Although he was fully determined to reserve to himself the difficulties as well as the advantages of this investigation, M. Fanferlot fully realized that he could not conceal Madame Gypsy from the examining magistrate. She must inevitably be mentioned and sought for some day or other. That was the principal reason why he did not choose that she should show herself of her own motion. He proposed to produce her when and how he thought proper, in order to claim for himself at all risks and without shame the credit of having discovered her. Wherefore he exerted himself, conscientiously at first, to allay the young woman's excitement. He thought that it would be an easy matter to satisfy her that the slightest movement in Prosper's favor would be rank folly.

"What will you gain, dear madame?" he asked her. "Nothing. You have not, I assure you, the faintest chance of success, and remember that you will compromise yourself seriously. Who knows if the authorities will not choose to look upon you as M. Bertomy's accomplice?"

But these alarming possibilities, which had checked Cavaillon, which had led him foolishly to give up a letter which he might so well have defended, simply stimulated Madame Gypsy's enthusiasm.

"What do I care for the danger?" she cried. "I don't believe in it, but if it exists, so much the better; it will give some merit to a perfectly natural attempt. I am sure that Prosper is innocent, but if the impossible happens and he is guilty, why, then

I propose to share the punishment that is in store for him."

Madame Gypsy's persistence was becoming troublesome. She had hurriedly thrown a large shawl over her shoulders and donned her hat, and thus arrayed, in peignoir and slippers, she declared that she was ready to start, ready to go and face all the magistrates in Paris.

"Are you coming, monsieur?" she demanded with feverish impatience; "are you coming?"

Fanferlot was nothing less than decided. Luckily, he has always several strings to his bow. Personal considerations having no influence on that energetic nature, he determined to invoke Prosper's own interest.

"I am entirely at your service, dear lady," he replied; "let us go, if you say so. But, before it is too late, let me tell you again that we are probably going to do the very worst thing for M. Bertomy."

"How so, please?"

"Because we are going to surprise him, dear lady; because we are taking a step which he cannot anticipate after what he wrote you."

The young woman made a superb gesture of haughty recklessness; she was afraid of nothing.

"There are people, monsieur," she replied, "whom it is necessary to save without notifying them, and, as you might say, in spite of them. I know Prosper; he is a man to allow himself to be murdered without a struggle, without a word, to give himself up through heedlessness, through despair."

"Excuse me, dear madame, excuse me!" the detective interposed. "M. Bertomy has not by any means the appearance of a man who gives himself up as you say. I am inclined to believe, on the con-

trary, that he has already constructed his plan of defence. How do you know that, by showing yourself when he urges you to keep out of sight, you will not destroy his surest means of clearing himself?"

Madame Gypsy did not reply at once. She was weighing Fanferlot's objections.

"But I cannot," she said at last, "sit here idle, without trying to contribute in some way to his safety. Can't you understand that the very floor burns my feet?"

Evidently, if she was not absolutely convinced, her resolution was shaken. The man from the prefecture felt that he was on the road to victory, and this certainty, enabling his mind to work more freely, imparted more authority to his eloquence.

"You have, dear madame," he rejoined, "one very simple means of helping the man you love."

"What is it, monsieur, what is it?"

"Obey him, my child," said M. Fanferlot, in a fatherly tone.

Madame Gypsy anticipated entirely different advice.

"Obey!" she murmured, "obey!"

"That is your duty," continued Fanferlot, assuming a grave and dignified bearing, "your sacred duty."

She still hesitated; whereupon he took from the table Prosper's letter, which she had placed there, and continued:—

"Think of it! M. Bertomy, at a terrible moment, when he is about to be arrested, writes to you to prescribe your conduct, and you propose to make that wise precaution of no effect! What does he say to you? Come, let us read this note together, which is, as it were, the testament of his liberty. He says: 'If you love me, obey me,'—and you hesitate to

obey! He says again: 'My life depends on your obedience.' You do not love him, then? What! do you not understand, unhappy child, that M. Bertomy has his reasons, imperative, terrible reasons for imploring you to fly, to conceal yourself?"

These reasons M. Fanferlot had divined as soon as he put his foot in the apartment on Rue Chaptal, and, if he did not as yet divulge them, it was because he was keeping them, as a good general keeps his reserve troops, to assure the victory.

Madame Gypsy was intelligent enough to divine them in her turn.

"Reasons!" she began. "Prosper does not want our liaison to be known!"

She stood for a moment lost in thought, then, as the light suddenly shone upon her mind, she cried: —

"Yes, now I understand. Fool that I am, not to have seen it at once! Of course my presence here, where I have been for a year, would be crushing evidence against him. They would prepare an inventory of everything I possess, — my dresses, my laces, my jewels; and they would make my luxury a crime on his part. They would ask him where he got the money to give me so much that he left me nothing to wish for."

The detective nodded in token of assent.

"That is just it," he replied.

"But in that case I must fly, monsieur, fly instantly! Who knows if the police are not already notified, if they won't soon be here?"

"Oh!" said M. Fanferlot, with a most knowing air, "you have time enough; the police aren't so shrewd or so quick."

"Never mind!"

And leaving the detective alone, Madame Nina

rushed into her bedroom shouting for her maid, her cook, for the little groom himself, bidding them empty the drawers and wardrobes, toss everything that belonged to her into trunks, and above all things to make haste, to hurry. She herself set the example, and she was working energetically, when a sudden thought led her back to Fanferlot.'

"Everything will be ready in a moment," she said, "and I will go; but where am I to go?"

"Does n't M. Bertomy tell you, dear madame? To the other end of Paris, to furnished lodgings, a hotel."

"But I don't know of any."

The man from the prefecture made a pretence of reflecting. He had the greatest difficulty in disguising the strange satisfaction which gleamed in his little round eyes, despite his efforts.

"I know a hotel," he said at last, "but perhaps it would n't suit you. *Dame*! it's not a luxurious place like this."

"Should I be comfortable there?"

"With my recommendation you will be treated like a little queen, and hidden so carefully—"

"Where is it?"

"Across the river, on Quai Saint-Michel, Hôtel de Grand-Archange, kept by Madame Alexandre."

Madame Nina was never long about making up her mind.

"Here are writing materials," she said to the detective; "write your letter of introduction."

In a minute it was done.

"With these three lines, dear lady," he said, "you can do with Madame Alexandre whatever you choose."

"Good! Now, how shall I let Cavaillon know my

address? It was he who was to give me Prosper's letter."

"He could not come, dear madame," the detective interrupted; "but I am going to see him immediately, and I will tell him where to find you."

Madame Gypsy was about to send for a cab, but Fanferlot, who said that he was in a hurry, undertook the errand. It was an excellent pretext to escape.

Indeed he was playing in great good luck that day. A cab was passing the house; he hailed it.

"You will wait here," he said to the cabman, after disclosing his identity, "for a small, dark young woman who is coming down in a moment with her luggage. If she tells you to drive her to Quai Saint-Michel, just crack your whip; if she gives you any other address, get down from your box before you start, as if to arrange a trace; I shall be where I can see and hear."

Thereupon he stationed himself on the other side of the street, in a wine-shop. He was dazed by all that he had learned, and, not knowing just what to think, he needed an opportunity to arrange his ideas.

He had little time for that; a tremendous cracking of a whip disturbed the silence of the street; Madame Nina had started for the Grand-Archange.

"Good!" he cried joyously, "I have her, at all events."

IV.

AT the very hour when Madame Nina Gypsy set out to take refuge at the Hôtel du Grand-Archange which M. Fanferlot had suggested to her, Prosper Bertomy was registered at the prefecture of police.

From the moment when he had mastered his emotion and had succeeded in recovering his usual demeanor, his self-possession had not again failed him. In vain did the people about him, shrewd observers, try to detect a shrinking of the glance, an expression of doubt on his features; they found him like marble. Indeed one might have deemed him insensible to his horrible situation but for the painful oppression revealed by his quickened breathing, by the drops of perspiration which trickled down his temples, betraying frightful agony of mind.

At the office of the inspector, where he had remained more than two hours, awaiting orders as to his future movements, he had talked with the two officers who had him in charge.

About noon he announced that he was hungry and felt the need of eating something. They brought him breakfast from a restaurant near by, and he ate heartily enough and drank almost a whole bottle of wine.

While he was there at least ten detectives and divers employés of the prefecture, who had business to transact with the inspectors every morning, came and scrutinized him curiously. All had the same feeling, and expressed it almost in the same terms. They said: —

“He’s a plucky rascal!”

Or: —

“That fellow’s too quiet not to need watching.”

When he was told that a cab was waiting below, he rose eagerly; but before going down he asked permission to light a cigar, which was granted. A flower-girl usually stood at the inspector’s door. He bought a small bunch of violets. The girl, understanding that he was arrested, said to him by way of thanks: —

"Good luck, my poor monsieur!"

"Thanks, my good girl," he replied, touched by this commonplace mark of interest, "it's a long time since I've had anything of the sort."

It was magnificent weather, a glorious spring day. On Rue Montmartre, Prosper put his head out of the window several times, complaining smilingly of being imprisoned when the sun was shining so brightly, when it was so pleasant to be out of doors.

"Strangely enough," he said, "I have never felt such a longing to walk about."

One of his keepers, a stout, good-humored fellow, greeted this reflection with a great roar of laughter.

"I can understand that," he said.

In the office, while the formalities of registering were being gone through with, Prosper replied with a sort of haughty disdain to the indispensable questions which were put to him. But when, after ordering him to empty his pockets, they went up to him to search him, a flash of indignation shot from his eyes, followed by a hot tear, instantly dried by the fierce heat of his cheek bones. But it was only a flash. He submitted, raising his arms, while rough hands felt his clothes from head to foot, to make sure that he was concealing no contraband objects.

The investigations might have been carried much farther and have become much more humiliating, but for the intervention of a middle-aged man of distinguished aspect, wearing a white cravat and gold-bowed spectacles, who was warming himself by the stove, and who seemed to be entirely at home in that place.

At sight of Prosper, when he entered with the officers, he made a gesture of surprise and seemed deeply moved; he even stepped forward as if to speak to him, but thought better of it. Disturbed in

mind as the cashier was, he could not help noticing that this man's eyes were obstinately fixed upon him. Could it be that he knew him? He ransacked his memory in vain; he could not remember that he had ever seen him.

This man, who had the bearing and general appearance of the chief of a bureau, was no other than an illustrious official of the prefecture of police — M. Lecoq. Just as the officers who had searched Prosper were about to take off his boots — a file or a weapon occupies so little room! — M. Lecoq made a sign and said: —

“That will do.”

The others obeyed. All the formalities were complied with, and the unhappy cashier was finally escorted to a narrow cell, and the door was closed upon him with a great clashing of locks and bolts; he drew a long breath, — he was alone.

Yes, he thought that he was alone, quite alone! he did not know that a prison is of glass, that the man charged with crime is like the wretched insect under the microscope of the entomologist. He did not know that the walls have ears that are always wide open, the wickets eyes that are always fixed upon the prisoner.

He was so sure of being alone that all his pride melted in a flood of tears, his mask of impassiveness fell. His wrath, so long restrained, burst forth violent and terrible, like a fire which has smouldered a long while and dried all the inflammable material roundabout. He stormed wildly, he shouted, he shrieked imprecations and blasphemy. He beat the stone walls with his clenched fists in a frenzy of rage as wild and powerless as that of the caged wild beast after the first moment of stupor.

For Prosper Bertomy was not what he seemed to be. That haughty, scrupulously correct gentleman, a sort of cold-blooded dandy, had fierce passions and a fiery disposition. But one day, when he was about twenty-four years old, ambition had bitten at his heart. While all his desires suffered torments, imprisoned in his mediocrity like a school-boy in a jacket that is too small for him, as he looked at all the wealthy men about him upon whom money bestowed the magic wand of the Thousand and One Nights, he envied their lot.

He investigated the origin and the starting-point of all the wealthy leaders of great financial undertakings and discovered that in the majority of instances they possessed at the outset less than he. How had they risen, pray? By dint of energy, intelligence, and boldness. For them, pregnant thoughts had been like the wonderful lamp in Aladdin's hand. He swore that he would imitate them and succeed like them.

From that day, with a force of will much less rare than is commonly supposed, he enforced silence on his instincts. He reformed, not his character, but the external manifestations of his character. And his efforts had not been thrown away. People had faith in him and his capacity. They who knew him said: —

“He will succeed!”

And here he was in prison, accused of theft, that is to say, ruined. For he did not delude himself with false hopes. He knew that, innocent or guilty, the suspected man is branded with a mark as ineffaceable as the letters that used to be burned with a red-hot iron into the shoulders of convicts. Of what use to struggle now? Of what use a triumph that does not wash away the stain?

When the turnkey who was on duty that evening brought him his supper, he found him stretched out on his bed, his face buried in his pillow, weeping scalding tears. Ah! he was hungry no longer, now that he was alone. An unconquerable numbness crept over him; his wavering will wandered aimlessly in a dense mist.

The night came, long and ghastly, and for the first time he had nought to tell the hours save the measured step of the watchmen relieving one another. He suffered intensely.

In the morning, however, with the daylight, sleep came to him, and he was sleeping when the turnkey's voice shouted into the cell.

"Come, monsieur," he said, "to the preliminary examination!"

With one bound he was on his feet; he was to be questioned.

"Let us go," he said, not thinking about repairing the disorder of his dress.

On the way, his keeper said to him:—

"You are lucky; you are in the hands of a mighty fine man."

The keeper was a thousand times right. Endowed with remarkable powers of penetration, firm, incapable of prejudice, equally far removed from false pity and excessive severity, M. Patrigent possesses in an eminent degree all the qualities demanded by the delicate and arduous post of examining magistrate. It may be that he lacks the feverish activity which is sometimes necessary to enable one to strike quickly and unerringly; but he possesses a sturdy patience which nothing can weary or discourage. He is quite capable, indeed, of continuing an examination for years, as he did at the time of the affair

of the Belgian bank-notes, of which he succeeded in picking up the threads only after four years of investigation. Thus it is to his office that the never-ending cases finally find their way, the inquiries that have stopped half-way, the unfinished prosecutions.

Such is, as nearly as he can be described, the man to whom Prosper was being taken; and he was taken by a very hard road. They led him through a long corridor, through a room full of Parisian policemen, down a flight of stairs, through a sort of subterranean passage, then up a steep, narrow staircase which had no end.

At last he arrived in a long, narrow gallery, low-studded, upon which a great many numbered doors opened. The unfortunate cashier's escort halted in front of one of these doors.

"We are there," he said; "this is where your fate is to be decided."

At this remark from the officer, uttered in a tone of profound commiseration, Prosper could not restrain a shudder. But it was true; behind that door was a man who was about to question him, and according to what he should reply, he would be released or the order of arrest issued on the preceding day would be changed to a commitment in due form.

However, summoning all his courage, he already had his hand on the door-knob, when his keeper detained him.

"Oh! not yet," he said; "you don't go in like that. Sit down; you will be called when it is your turn."

The poor devil obeyed, and his companion sat down beside him.

There is nothing so horrible, nothing so ghastly as

the waiting in that dark gallery of the examining magistrates. A rough oaken bench, blackened by constant use, stands against the wall from end to end. Involuntarily you reflect that for ten years past all the suspected criminals, all the thieves, all the murderers in the department of the Seine have sat on that bench one after another. For, sooner or later, as surely as sewage reaches the drain, crime arrives at that terrible gallery, which has one door leading to the galleys, another to the platform of the scaffold. There, according to the vulgar but expressive remark of a former first-president, is the great public laundry of all the dirty linen of Paris.

The gallery was very animated when Prosper arrived there. The bench was almost entirely filled. Beside him, so near that he touched him, they had seated a man in rags, with a sinister face.

Before each door, which is that of some examining magistrate, stood groups of witnesses talking together in undertones. Gendarmes were constantly going in and out, their heavy boots ringing on the flagstones, bringing prisoners in or taking them away. Sometimes one could hear a sob rising above the dull murmur, and a woman, the mother or sister of some prisoner, would pass by with a handkerchief at her eyes. At brief intervals a door opened and closed, and a bailiff's voice called out a name or a number.

At that sight, at the contact with those degraded creatures, amid that hot atmosphere heavy with unfamiliar emanations, the cashier was beginning to feel that his strength was failing him, when a little old man dressed in black, with the insignia of his dignity, the steel chain across his breast, called : —

“ Prosper Bertomy ! ”

The poor fellow sprang to his feet, and, without

knowing just how he got there, found himself in the examining magistrate's office. He was dazzled at first. He had left a very dark place, and through the window of the room he entered, directly opposite the door, a flood of glaring light poured in.

This office, like all those in the gallery, is devoid of special features. One would think one's self in almost any solicitor's office. It is hung with a cheap dark-green paper, and on the floor is a wretched carpet with a commonplace black pattern. Opposite the door is a high desk, covered with bundles of papers, behind which the magistrate sits, facing those who come in, so that his own face remains in shadow while the prisoner's or witness's whom he is questioning is in full light. At the right is a small table for the clerk, the magistrate's indispensable auxiliary.

But Prosper did not observe these details. His whole attention was concentrated on the magistrate, and the more closely he scrutinized him, the more convinced he was that his keeper had not deceived him.

In very truth, M. Patrigent's face, an irregular face, framed in short red whiskers, enlivened by keen, intelligent eyes, exhaling kindliness, is one of those which reassure and attract at first sight.

"Take a chair," he said to Prosper.

This courtesy made the deeper impression on the prisoner because he had expected to be treated with the utmost contempt. It seemed to him of favorable augury, and restored his freedom of thought to some extent.

Meanwhile M. Patrigent had made a sign to the clerk.

"We are going to begin, Sigault," he said; "attention."

He turned to Prosper.

"Your name, monsieur?" he asked.

"Auguste Prosper Bertomy, monsieur."

"Your age?"

"I shall be thirty on May 5th next."

"What is your business?"

"I am, that is to say, I was, cashier in the banking-house of André Fauvel, monsieur."

The magistrate interrupted him to consult a little memorandum that lay on his desk. Prosper, who followed all his movements closely, began to hope, saying to himself that a man who seemed so little prejudiced against him would not keep him in prison. Having found what he sought, M. Patrigent resumed the examination.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"I have lived at number 39 Rue Chaptal for four years. Before that at number 7 Boulevard des Batignolles."

"Where were you born?"

"At Beaucaire, department of Gard."

"Are your parents still living?"

"I lost my mother two years ago, monsieur, but my father is alive."

"Does he live in Paris?"

"No, monsieur, he lives at Beaucaire with my sister, who is married to one of the engineers of the Midi Canal."

Prosper replied to these last questions in a terribly distressed voice. If there are moments in life when the thought of one's family encourages and consoles, there are also ghastly moments when one would like to be alone in the world and to have been reared in the Foundling Hospital.

M. Patrigent observed and made a mental note of

the prisoner's emotion when he had spoken to him of his parents.

"And what is your father's business?" he asked.

"He was in the employ of the Department of Roads and Bridges, monsieur, and afterward of the Midi Canal, like my brother-in-law; he has retired now."

There was a moment's silence. The magistrate had so placed his chair that, while he seemed to have his head turned away, he lost absolutely nothing of the play of Prosper's features.

"Well!" he said suddenly, "you are charged with stealing 350,000 francs from your employer."

In twenty-four hours the unhappy young man had had time to familiarize himself with the horrible idea of this accusation, and yet, stated thus concisely and baldly, it staggered him, and he could not utter a syllable.

"What answer have you to make?" persisted the magistrate.

"I am innocent, monsieur, I swear it; I am innocent!"

"I trust it is so," said M. Patrigent, "and you can rely upon me to assist you with all my power to make your innocence apparent. But have you any facts to allege in your own defence, any proofs to adduce?"

"Ah! monsieur, what can I say when I myself do not understand what can have taken place! I can only appeal to my whole past life—"

The magistrate interrupted Prosper with a gesture.

"Let us come to the facts," he said; "the theft was committed under such circumstances that suspicion can rest only upon M. Fauvel or you, it seems to me. Do you suspect any other person?"

"No, monsieur."

"You say you are innocent, therefore M. Fauvel must be guilty."

Prosper did not reply.

"Have you any reason to believe," continued M. Patrigent, "that your employer would be likely to rob himself? However slight it may be, tell me."

And as the prisoner still held his peace he added :

"Well, you need further time for reflection, I see. Listen to your examination, which my clerk will read to you ; then you will sign it and return to prison."

The unfortunate wretch was crushed. The last ray that had lighted his despair was extinguished. He heard nothing of what Sigault said to him, and signed without reading. He staggered so when he left the magistrate's office that his keeper advised him to lean upon him.

"Did n't it go off well?" he asked. "Come, monsieur, you must have courage."

Courage! Prosper had none left when he found himself in his cell once more ; but with wrath, hatred entered into his heart. He had made up his mind that he would speak to the magistrate, that he would defend himself, that he would prove his innocence, and he had had no time. He bitterly reproached himself for allowing himself to be taken in by the appearance of benevolence.

"What a farce!" he said to himself; "is that what they call an examination?"

No, it was not an examination, but a mere formality. In compelling Prosper's appearance, M. Patrigent complied with Article 93 of the Code of Criminal Law, which provides that "every accused person held under a warrant shall be questioned within twenty-four hours at the latest."

But no examining magistrate can collect all the

elements of an examination in twenty-four hours, especially in such a case as this, in the absence of any *corpus delicti*, of any material proof, of any clew even. To triumph over the obstinate defence of an accused man who shuts himself up in absolute denial as in a fortress, one must have weapons. These weapons M. Patrigent set about preparing.

If Prosper had remained an hour longer in the gallery, he would have seen the same bailiff who had summoned him come out of the magistrate's office and call: —

“Number three!”

The witness numbered three, who sat on the bench awaiting his turn, was M. André Fauvel.

The banker was no longer the same man. When he entered the magistrate's presence, his irritation against his cashier was no less marked than his benevolent impulses in his own office on the preceding day. Reflection, which ordinarily brings tranquillity and with it the longing to forgive, had brought him nought but anger and a longing for revenge.

The inevitable questions which begin every inquiry had no sooner been asked than his natural impetuosity ran away with him and he indulged in profuse recriminations, even in invectives against Prosper. M. Patrigent actually had to enjoin silence upon him, reminding him of what he owed to himself, however his clerk might have wronged him.

The magistrate, who had been so gentle with the accused man just before, became very particular and exacting. For Prosper's examination had been only a formality, the bald statement of a brutal fact. Now it was a matter of seeking the collateral facts, the special incidents; in a word, of collecting the circumstances, even those apparently the most insignificant,

in one stout bundle, in order to secure a conviction with them.

"Let us proceed in order, monsieur," he said to M. Fauvel; "and for the moment confine yourself, I beg, to answering my questions. Did you suspect your cashier's honesty?"

"Certainly not! And yet there were a thousand reasons why I should have been anxious."

"What were they, pray?"

"M. Bertomy, my cashier, gambled; he passed whole nights at baccarat, and several times I have known of his losing large sums. He had undesirable acquaintances. Once he was involved, with one of my customers, M. de Clameran, in a gambling scandal, which began at some woman's house and ended in the police court."

And for more than a minute the banker proceeded with a terrible arraignment of Prosper. When he finally paused, the magistrate rejoined:—

"You must admit, monsieur, that you were very imprudent, not to say culpable, to venture to trust your funds to such a man."

"Ah! monsieur," replied M. Fauvel, "Prosper was n't always like this. Until about a year ago he was a model for men of his age. My house was open to him, and he was almost one of my family; he passed all his evenings with us; he was my son Lucien's intimate friend. Then, all of a sudden, between one day and the next, he abruptly ceased his visits, and we have seen no more of him. And yet I had every reason to believe that he was deeply in love with my niece Madeleine."

M. Patrigent drew his eyebrows together in a way that is characteristic of him when he thinks that he has a clew.

"May it not have been just that passion," he asked, "which led M. Bertomy to cease his visits?"

"Why so?" said the banker, with a most surprised air. "I would have given him Madeleine's hand with the best will in the world, and, to tell the truth, I supposed that he would ask me for it. My niece would have been a good match, better than he could have hoped to find; she is very pretty and she will have a dowry of half a million."

"Then you can discover no motive for your cashier's behavior?"

The banker seemed to reflect.

"Absolutely none," he replied. "I have always thought that Prosper had been led out of the straight path by a young man whose acquaintance he made at my house about that time, M. Raoul de Lagors."

"Ah! who is that young man?"

"A relation of my wife, a charming boy, clever and well educated, a little wild, but rich enough to pay for his escapades."

The magistrate no longer seemed to listen; he wrote the name of Lagors on his memorandum, at the end of a list of names already of considerable length.

"Now," he continued, "let us come to the fact. You are sure that the theft was not committed by any one of your household?"

"Absolutely sure; yes, monsieur."

"Your key never left you?"

"At all events, very rarely; and when I did not carry it in my pocket I always put it in one of the drawers of the secretary in my bedroom."

"Where was it on the night of the robbery?"

"In my secretary."

"But in that case —"

"Excuse me, monsieur," M. Fauvel interposed; "allow me to remind you that with a safe like mine the key is of no importance. First of all you must know the word on which the five buttons turn. With the word you can in an emergency open it without the key, but without the word —"

"And you told no one the word?"

"No one on earth, no, monsieur. And by the way, I should sometimes have been greatly puzzled to know with what word the safe was locked. Prosper changed it when he chose, and I sometimes forgot it."

"Had you forgotten it on the day of the theft?"

"No, the word had been changed two days before, and its oddity impressed me."

"What was it?"

"Gypsy, G,y,p,s,y," said the banker, spelling the word out.

M. Patrigent wrote down this word as well.

"One more question, monsieur," he said; "were you at home on the evening of the theft?"

"No, monsieur; I dined with a friend of mine and passed the evening with him. When I returned home, about one o'clock, my wife was in bed, and I went to bed at once myself."

"And you did not know how much money there was in the safe?"

"Not at all. Relying upon my precise orders, I was justified in assuming that there was only a trifling amount there. I so informed the inspector, and M. Bertomy agreed."

"That is true; the report so states."

M. Patrigent was silent. To his mind the whole case lay in this fact: The banker did not know that there were 350,000 francs in the safe, and Prosper had failed in his duty in drawing the fund

from the Bank; therefore — the conclusion was easily drawn.

Seeing that no further questions were put to him, the banker thought that he might at last say all that he had on his heart.

"I believe myself to be above suspicion, monsieur," he began, "and yet I shall not sleep in peace until my cashier's guilt is fully established. Calumny prefers to attack the man who has been successful; I may be calumniated. 350,000 francs is a fortune large enough to tempt the wealthiest man. I shall be grateful to you if you will have an examination made of the condition of my business; it will show beyond question that I could have no object in robbing myself; the prosperous condition of my —"

"Enough, monsieur."

It was enough, in very truth. M. Patrigent was already fully informed and knew the banker's condition as well as he knew it himself. He requested him to sign his examination, and escorted him to the door of his office, — a rare attention on his part.

When M. Fauvel had gone, Sigault, the clerk, ventured to make an observation.

"This is a devilishly obscure case," he said. "If the cashier is shrewd and holds his ground, it seems to me very hard to convict him."

"Perhaps," replied the magistrate, "but let us see the other witnesses."

The witness numbered four was no other than Lucien, M. Fauvel's oldest son.

This young man, a tall, handsome fellow of twenty-two, testified that he was very fond of Prosper, that he had been very intimate with him, and that he had always considered him an honest man, incapable even of the slightest indelicacy. He declared that

at that moment he was unable to explain how and by what sequence of fatal circumstances Prosper had been led to commit a theft. He had noticed that Prosper gambled, but not so much as people said. He had never seen anything to indicate that he was living beyond his means.

On the subject of his cousin Madeleine he replied :

" I have always thought that Prosper was in love with Madeleine, and until yesterday I have always felt sure that he would marry her, knowing that my father would not oppose the marriage. I have always attributed Prosper's avoidance of our house to a falling-out with my cousin, but I was sure that they would be reconciled sooner or later."

This testimony threw even more light than M. Fauvel's on the cashier's past, but apparently disclosed nothing from which any useful inference could be drawn in the present conjuncture.

Lucien signed his deposition and withdrew. It was young Cavaillon's turn to be questioned.

The poor fellow was in a most pitiable plight when he appeared before the judge. Having, with the utmost secrecy, told one of his friends, a solicitor's clerk, of his adventure with the detective, the said clerk had poked fun at him unmercifully for his cowardice. He was suffering horribly from remorse, and had passed the night reviling himself for having ruined Prosper.

He had at all events the merit of trying to repair what he called his treachery. He did not precisely accuse M. Fauvel, but he boldly declared that he was the cashier's friend, his debtor, and that he was as sure of his innocence as of his own. Unfortunately, he not only had no proofs to adduce in support of his assertion, but his professions of pas-

sionate affection greatly diminished the value of his testimony.

After Cavaillon, six or eight clerks of the banking-house succeeded one another in the magistrate's office; but their depositions were almost all of trifling importance. One of them, however, made one statement of which the magistrate made a note. He pretended to know that Prosper had speculated on the Bourse, through M. Raoul de Lagors, and had gained large sums.

Five o'clock was striking when the list of witnesses for the day was exhausted. But M. Patrigent's task was not yet done. He rang for his door-keeper, who appeared at once, and said to him: —

"Go as quickly as possible and find Fanferlot."

The detective did not answer the magistrate's summons for a long time. Having met one of his colleagues in the gallery, he had felt called upon to offer him some attention, and the door-keeper was obliged to rout him out of the little bar-room at the corner.

"Since when have you been in the habit of making magistrates wait for you?" said M. Patrigent, sternly, when he finally appeared.

Fanferlot, who had bowed to the floor as he entered, bowed, if possible, even lower than before. The fact was, that, for all his smiling countenance, he was beset by a thousand qualms. In order to follow up this Bertomy case alone, he was required to play a double game, which might be discovered. In trying to handle the goat of justice and the cabbage-stalk of his ambition, he ran great risks, the least of which was the loss of his place.

"I have had a great deal to do," he replied by way of apology; "and I have not wasted my time."

And he at once set about giving an account of his

procedure, — not without embarrassment, by the way, for he spoke with all sorts of restrictions, selecting what he should tell and what he should keep to himself. For instance, he told the story of Cavaillon's letter, and even handed the magistrate the letter itself, which he had stolen from Gypsy, but he did not mention Madeleine. On the other hand, he supplied a mass of biographical details concerning Prosper and Gypsy, which he had gleaned here, there, and everywhere.

As he went on with his story, M. Patrigent's convictions took deeper root.

"Clearly, that young man is guilty," he muttered.

Fanferlot did not reply to this reflection. He did not share the magistrate's opinion, but was overjoyed with the idea that he was on a false scent, saying to himself that there would be all the more glory for him when he should seize the real culprit. The pity of it was that he did not know as yet how to attain that desirable result.

Having listened to all that he had to tell, the magistrate dismissed the detective, giving him divers instructions, and making an appointment with him for the following day.

"Above all," he said in conclusion, "do not lose sight of the Gypsy woman; she must know where the money is, and may put us on the trace of it."

Fanferlot smiled cunningly.

"Monsieur may be easy on that score," he said; "the lady is in good hands."

When he was left alone, M. Patrigent, although the evening was far advanced, took further measures to swell the flood of depositions that was to burst upon him. The case had taken exclusive possession of his mind, and vexed him and attracted him at the same

time. It seemed to him that he could detect certain obscure and mysterious features about the affair, which he vowed that he would solve.

The next morning he was at his office long before the usual hour. On that day he heard the statement of Madame Gypsy, sent for Cavaillon a second time, and for M. Fauvel. And he displayed the same activity on the following days.

Only two of the witnesses he had summoned failed to appear. The first was the messenger whom Prosper had sent to the Bank to draw the funds; he was suffering from a severe fall. The second was M. Raoul de Lagors.

But their absence did not prevent Prosper's file from growing larger and larger, and on the following Monday, that is to say, five days after the crime, M. Patrigent thought that he had in his hands sufficient moral proof to crush his prisoner.

V

WHILE his whole life was being most minutely investigated, Prosper was in prison, confined "in secret." The first two days did not seem very long to him. At his request they had given him several sheets of paper, numbered, for which he must account, and he scribbled in a sort of frenzy plans of defence and exculpatory memoranda.

On the third day he began to be anxious because he had seen nobody except the convicts who were employed about the cells of the "secret" prisoners, and the turnkey who brought him his meals.

"Am I not to be examined again?" he asked every time the turnkey appeared.

"Your turn will come, I tell you," was the invariable reply.

And the days passed, and the miserable wretch, tortured by the agony of solitary confinement, which shatters the most energetic natures, fell into the gloomiest sort of despair.

"Am I shut up here forever, in God's name?" he would cry.

But no, he was not forgotten, for on the Monday morning, at an hour when the turnkey never came to his cell, he heard the grinding of the key in the lock.

He sprang to his feet at one bound and ran to the door. But, at the sight of a white-haired man standing on the threshold, he stopped as if paralyzed.

"Father!" he faltered, "father!"

"Yes, your father."

Prosper's first stupefaction had given place to an overpowering rush of joy. In truth, a father is the friend upon whom one can rely, whatever may happen. In the frightful hours when every prop fails, one remembers the man upon whom he leaned when a child, and, even though he can do nothing, his mere presence is as encouraging and comforting as that of an all-powerful protector.

Without pausing to reflect, impelled by an outburst of effusive emotion, Prosper put out his arms as if to throw himself on his father's neck.

M. Bertomy harshly repulsed him.

"Stand back!" he exclaimed.

Thereupon he stepped into the cell, and the door closed upon him. The father and son were face to face,—Prosper crushed, heartbroken; M. Bertomy angry, almost threatening.

Spurned by that last friend, his father, the unfortu-

nate cashier seemed to brace himself to endure a paroxysm of excruciating pain.

"You, too," he cried, "you!—you believe me guilty!"

"Spare yourself a shameful comedy," interposed M. Bertomy; "I know all."

"But I am innocent, father; I swear it by my mother's sacred memory!"

"Villain!" cried M. Bertomy, "do not blaspheme!"

A wave of irresistible emotion swept over him, and his voice was weak, almost unintelligible, as he added:—

"Your mother died, Prosper, and I did not dream that the day would come when I should bless God for having taken her from me. Your crime would have killed her!"

There was a long silence; at last Prosper began:

"You crush me, father, just at the moment when I need all my courage, at the moment when I am made a victim of a most execrable plot."

"Victim!" exclaimed M. Bertomy, "victim!—That is to say that you try to smirch with your insinuations the kind-hearted, honorable man who has taken care of you, who has overwhelmed you with benefactions, who had assured you a brilliant position, who was preparing for you a future for which you had no right to hope! It is bad enough to have robbed him; do not slander him!"

"In Heaven's name, father, let me tell you —"

"What! I suppose you will deny your employer's kindness! And yet you were so sure of his affection that you wrote me one day to bid me make ready to come to Paris in order to ask M. Fauvel for his niece's hand. Was that a lie, pray?"

"No," Prosper replied in a choking voice, "no."

"That was a year ago; you loved Mademoiselle Madeleine then, — at least, you wrote me that you did —"

"Why, I love her now, father, more dearly than ever; I have never ceased to love her!"

M. Bertomy made a gesture of pitying contempt.

"Indeed!" he cried. "And the thought of that chaste, pure maiden whom you loved did not check you on the threshold of a life of debauchery! You loved her! — Then, in God's name, how dared you, without a blush, enter her presence on leaving the degrading companions with whom you consorted?"

"In the name of Heaven, let me explain to you the fatality by which Madeleine —"

"Enough, monsieur, enough; I know everything, I tell you. I saw your employer yesterday. This morning I have seen your magistrate, and I owe to his kindness the privilege of being admitted to see you. Do you know that I had to submit to be searched, almost undressed, before I came in? They thought that I was bringing you a weapon."

Prosper no longer tried to struggle. He had sunk, in utter despair, upon the prison stool.

"I have seen your apartments, and your crime is explained. I saw silk hangings at all the doors, and pictures in gilt frames on all the walls. In my father's house the walls were whitewashed, and there was only one arm-chair in the house, my mother's. Our luxury was our probity. You are the first one of the family to have Aubusson carpets; to be sure, you are the first thief that ever dishonored the family!"

At this last insult the blood rushed to Prosper's cheeks; however, he did not stir.

"But we must have luxury nowadays," pursued

M. Bertomy, working himself into a passion at the sound of his own words; "we must have luxury at any price. We aspire to the insolent wealth and the magnificence of the parvenu before we have succeeded [*parvenu*]. We keep mistresses who wear satin slippers lined with swan's-down, like those I saw at the foot of your bed, and we have servants in livery. And we steal! And the bankers have reached the point where they no longer dare to intrust the key of their safe to any one. And every morning some unlooked-for crime splashes honorable families with mud."

M. Bertomy paused abruptly; he had observed that his son seemed to be beyond hearing him.

"Enough of that," he said. "I did not come here to reproach you; I came to save, if possible, some portion of our honor, to prevent our name being printed in the criminal reports among the names of thieves and murderers. Stand up and listen to me."

At his father's imperious command, Prosper sprang to his feet. Such a succession of crushing blows had reduced him to the condition of savage insensibility of the miserable wretch who has nothing more to dread.

"First of all," said M. Bertomy, "how much have you left of the 350,000 francs you stole?"

"Once more, father," replied the unhappy youth, in a tone of heart-rending resignation, "once more, I say I am innocent."

"Very good; I expected that reply. Then our family will make good the loss you have caused your employer."

"What! what do you mean?"

"On the day that I learned of your crime, your brother-in-law brought me your sister's dowry, sev-

enty thousand francs. I have succeeded in raising a hundred and forty thousand myself. That makes in all two hundred and ten thousand, which I have with me, and which I am going to carry to M. Fauvel."

This threat roused Prosper from his stupor.

"You shall not do that!" he cried with ill-restrained violence.

"I shall do it before the end of the day. For the rest of the amount M. Fauvel will give me time. My pension is fifteen hundred francs; I can live on five hundred, and I am still strong enough to earn something; your brother-in-law, for his part —"

M. Bertomy stopped short, terrified by the expression of his son's face. Wrath so fierce that it bordered on madness contracted his features; his eyes, dull and lifeless a moment before, emitted flames.

"You have no right, father," he cried, "no, you have no right to do this. You can refuse to believe me, if you please, but you have no right to take a step which would amount to a confession and would ruin me. Who tells you that I am guilty? What? when the law hesitates, you, my own father, do not hesitate, and, more pitiless than the law, condemn me unheard!"

"I shall do my duty!"

"That is to say that, when I am on the edge of the precipice, you propose to push me over! Is that what you call your duty? What! between strangers who accuse me, and myself, who swear to you that I am innocent, you do not hesitate? Why is it? Is it because I am your son? Our honor is in danger, it is true; an additional reason for supporting me, for assisting me to defend it and save it."

Prosper had succeeded in finding the accent which causes doubt to penetrate to the inmost depths of the

understanding and to shake the most deeply rooted convictions. M. Bertomy was moved.

"And yet," he muttered, "everything is against you."

"Ah! father, you do not know that one day I was compelled to turn my back on Madeleine; I had no other choice. I was desperate, I wanted to make myself forget. I sought forgetfulness and found disgust and shame. O Madeleine!"

His voice faltered; but in a moment he resumed with increasing vehemence:—

"Everything is against me, but no matter! I shall find a way to justify myself or perish in the attempt. Human justice is liable to err; though innocent, I may be convicted; so be it, I will undergo my punishment; but sentences come to an end —"

"Unhappy boy, what are you saying?"

"I say, father, that I am another man now. My life henceforth has one object, revenge. I am the victim of an infamous plot. So long as I have a drop of blood in my veins, I will hunt the author of it. And I shall find him; he will have to atone for my tortures and my agony. The shot was fired from the Fauvel house, and there is where I must search for the one who fired it."

"Take care!" said M. Bertomy, "your anger is leading you astray!"

"Oh! I understand; you propose to extol M. André Fauvel's uprightness; you will tell me that all the virtues have taken refuge in the bosom of that patriarchal family. What do you know about it? Would it be the first time that a laudable appearance of honesty has concealed the most shameful secrets? Why did Madeleine one day, without warning, forbid me to think of her? Why did she banish me when she

suffers as much as I from our separation, when she loves me still? — you understand, when she loves me still; for I am sure of it, I have the proof of it.”

The hour allotted to M. Bertomy for an interview with his son had passed, and the turnkey came and told him so. A thousand conflicting sentiments tore the unhappy father’s heart and deprived him of all freedom of thought.

Suppose that Prosper were telling the truth! How bitter his remorse would be hereafter for having added to his misery, which was already so great! And how could he know that he was not telling the truth? The voice of that son, of whom he had long been proud, awoke in him all his violently repressed paternal love. Ah! even though he were guilty, and guilty of a worse crime, was he the less his son? His face had lost all its sternness, his eyes glistened with tears that were ready to flow.

He intended to go forth indignant and solemn, as he had entered, but he had not the cruel courage. His heart was breaking; he opened his arms and strained Prosper to his breast.

“Oh, my son!” he whispered as he withdrew, “God grant that you speak the truth!”

Prosper had carried the day; he had almost persuaded his father of his innocence. But he had no time to exult over his victory. The door of his cell opened almost instantly after it had closed, and the turnkey’s voice, as on the first day, cried: —

“Come, monsieur, to the examining magistrate.”

He had no choice but to obey, and he obeyed. But his gait was no longer that of the first days; a complete change had taken place in him. He walked with head erect, with a firm step, and the fire of determination gleamed in his eyes.

He knew the road now, and he walked a little in advance of the officer who accompanied him. As he was passing through the small lower room, used by the detectives and police officers on duty, he met the man with gold-bowed spectacles who had stared at him so persistently in the clerk's office.

"Courage! M. Prosper Bertomy," said this individual; "if you are innocent, there are those who will assist you."

Prosper, greatly surprised, stopped and would have replied, but the man had already passed on.

"Who is that gentleman?" he asked his escort.

"What! you don't know him?" replied the officer, with an air of profound surprise; "why, that's Monsieur Lecoq, of the detective force."

"Who is Lecoq?"

"You might take the trouble to say 'Monsieur,'" said the officer, in an aggrieved tone; "it wouldn't take the skin off your mouth. Monsieur Lecoq is a man to whom nobody tells anything, and who knows whatever he wants to know. If you had had him instead of that palavering idiot of a Fanferlot, your case would have been settled long ago. Things don't drag much with him. But he seems to know you."

"I never saw him until the day I was brought here."

"You had better not swear to that, because, you see, no one can boast that he knows M. Lecoq's real face. He's one thing to-day and another to-morrow; sometimes dark, sometimes light; sometimes a mere boy, sometimes so old that you'd say he was a hundred. Why, look you, he fools *me*, who am telling you this, whenever he chooses; I talk with a stranger—paf! it's him. Any one you meet may be him. If any one should tell me you were him I'd

say: 'It's quite possible.' Ah! he can boast of doing whatever he pleases with his body."

The officer would have continued the legend of M. Lecoq at great length had he not just then arrived with his prisoner in the examining magistrate's gallery.

This time Prosper had not to wait on the humble wooden bench; on the contrary, the magistrate was waiting for him. Indeed it was M. Patrigent who had brought about the interview between M. Bertomy and his son, being a profound observer of the impulses of the human heart. He was sure that a heart-rending, terrible scene would take place between the father, a man of the most rigid probity, and the son accused of theft, and he confidently believed that that scene would crush Prosper. He had said to himself that he would summon him to his presence at once, that he would arrive with his nerves quivering with intense emotion, and that he, the magistrate, would extort the truth from his confusion and his despair.

He was surprised in no small degree, therefore, by the cashier's attitude, — determined, but not constrained, proud and self-assured, but with no trace of impertinence or defiance.

"Well!" M. Patrigent asked him first of all, "have you reflected?"

"Not being guilty, monsieur, I had no occasion to reflect."

"Ah!" said the judge, "the prison has not proved a judicious adviser to you. You have forgotten that sincerity and penitence are indispensable to him who would merit the indulgence of his judges."

"I need neither indulgence nor pardon, monsieur."

M. Patrigent could not restrain a gesture of irrita-

tion. He was silent a moment, then demanded abruptly: —

“What should you say if I were to tell you what has become of the 350,000 francs?”

Prosper shook his head sadly.

“If that were known,” he replied, “I should be at liberty, and not here.”

The commonplace expedient employed by the magistrate is often successful. But with a prisoner so thoroughly self-possessed, it had little chance of success. However, he had taken the risk and tried it.

“So you cling to your first system,” he continued. “You persist in accusing your employer.”

“Him or somebody else.”

“I beg your pardon — him only, for no one else had the word. Had he any motive whatever for robbing himself?”

“I have tried to think, monsieur, but I can imagine none.”

“Very good!” said the judge, sternly; “now I will tell you what motive *you* had for robbing him.”

M. Patrigent spoke like a man who is sure of his facts, but his assurance was only on the surface. He had prepared himself to strike down with a crushing blow a prisoner who was to come before him quivering with emotion; he was disconcerted when he found him so calm and determined in his denials.

“Will you tell me,” he began in a tone which betrayed his irritation, “can you tell me how much you have spent this last year?”

Prosper had no need to reflect or calculate.

“Yes, monsieur,” he replied unhesitatingly. “The circumstances were such that I observed the strictest method in my madness. I have spent about 50,000 francs.”

"And where did you get it?"

"In the first place, monsieur, I had 12,000 francs that came to me from my mother's estate. I drew from M. Fauvel, on account of my salary and my share of the profits, 14,000 francs. I made about 8,000 on the Bourse. The balance I borrowed and still owe it, but I am able to pay it, having 15,000 francs in M. Fauvel's hands."

The accounting was clear, precise, easy to verify; it was probably accurate.

"Who loaned you money to such an amount?"

"M. Raoul de Lagors."

This witness, who had started on a journey the very day of the theft, had not been heard. M. Patrigent had no choice but to accept Prosper's statement for the moment.

"Very good," he said; "I will not insist on this point. Tell me why, despite your employer's specific orders, you sent to the Bank for the money the night before, and not on the day the payment was to be made."

"Because, monsieur, M. de Clameran had given me to understand that it would be agreeable, yes, advantageous to him, to have his funds in the morning; he will so testify, if you summon him. On the other hand, I supposed that I should reach the office late."

"This M. de Clameran is a friend of yours?"

"By no means; I have even had a sort of feeling of repulsion for him, for which there was no justification, I frankly admit; but he is very intimate with my friend M. de Lagors."

During the considerable time which Sigault, the clerk, required to write the prisoner's replies, M. Patrigent was cudgelling his brains. He asked himself

what could possibly have taken place between M. Bertomy and his son, to transform Prosper thus.

"Another question," continued the magistrate; "how did you pass the evening previous to the crime?"

"On leaving my office at five o'clock, I took the train for Saint-Germain and went to Vésinet, to M. Raoul de Lagors' country-house. I carried him 1,500 francs for which he had asked me, and in his absence I left the money with his servant."

"Were you told that M. de Lagors was about to start on a journey?"

"No, monsieur, I do not know whether he is away from Paris."

"Very good. On leaving your friend's house, what did you do?"

"I returned to Paris and dined with a friend of mine at a restaurant on the boulevard."

"And then?"

Prosper hesitated.

"You do not answer," continued M. Patrigent; "then I will tell you how you employed your time. You went to your own apartments on Rue Chaptal, you dressed, and you attended an evening party given by one of the women who style themselves dramatic artists and who dishonor the theatres in which they appear; whose wages are a hundred crowns, and who have horses and carriages,—the Wilson woman."

"That is true, monsieur."

"They play for high stakes at the Wilson woman's, do they not?"

"Sometimes."

"However, you are accustomed to parties of that sort. Were you not involved in a scandalous affair

at the house of a woman of the same stamp, named Crescenzi?"

"In so far as that I was summoned to testify, having been witness of a theft."

"To be sure—gambling leads to theft. And at the Wilson woman's did you not play baccarat and lose 1,800 francs?"

"Excuse me, monsieur, only 1,100."

"Very good. You paid that morning a note of 1,000 francs?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Moreover, there was five hundred francs in your secretary, and when you were arrested you had four hundred in your purse. That makes in all 4,500 francs in twenty-four hours."

Prosper was not disconcerted, but stupefied. Having no suspicion of the powerful means of investigation at the disposal of the prosecuting officers of Paris, he wondered how the magistrate could have acquired such accurate information in so short a time.

"Your information is exact, monsieur," he said at last.

"Where did you get this money, when, only the day before, you were so short that you postponed the payment of a bill of trifling amount?"

"On the day that you mention, monsieur, I sold through a broker some securities which I had, for 3,000 francs; I also took from my cash, in anticipation of my salary, 2,000 francs. I have nothing to conceal."

Decidedly, the prisoner had a reply for everything. M. Patrigent was fain to seek another point of attack.

"If you have nothing to conceal," he said, "why this note"—exhibiting it—"tossed secretly to one of your fellow-clerks?"

That blow struck home. Prosper's eyes wavered before the examining magistrate's.

"I thought," he stammered, "I wanted —"

"You wanted to conceal your mistress."

"Well, yes, monsieur, it is true. I knew that when one is accused of crime as I am, all the weaknesses, all the backslidings of his life, become terrible witnesses against him."

"That is to say, you realized that the presence of a woman in your apartments would give tremendous weight to the charge. For you do live with a woman?"

"I am young, monsieur."

"Enough! — the law can excuse ephemeral escapades, but not the scandal of such unions as yours, which are a permanent challenge to public morals. The man who has so little self-respect as to live with an abandoned woman does not raise her to his level, but sinks to hers."

"Monsieur!"

"You know, I suppose, who the woman is to whom you would allow the honorable name born by your mother to be applied?"

"Madame Gypsy, monsieur, was a governess when I first knew her; she was born in Oporto and came to France with a Portuguese family."

The magistrate shrugged his shoulders.

"Her name is not Gypsy," he said; "she was never a governess, she is not a Portuguese."

Prosper would have protested, but M. Pâtrigent imposed silence on him with a gesture. He turned over the papers in an enormous bundle that lay before him.

"Ah! here we are," he said; "listen: Palmyre Chocaille, born in Paris in 1840, daughter of Jacques

Chocareille, undertaker's assistant, and Caroline Pied-lent, his wife."

The prisoner made an impatient gesture. He did not understand that the magistrate's special purpose at that moment was to prove to him that nothing escapes the police.

"Palmyre Chocareille," he continued, "at twelve years of age was apprenticed to a shoe-maker, and remained there until she was sixteen. We lose trace of her for a year. At seventeen she enters the employ of M. and Madame Dombas, grocers on Rue Saint-Denis, as a maidservant, and remains there three months. In this same year, 1857, she had eight or ten different places. In 1858, tired of domestic service, she became a shop-girl in a fan-dealer's establishment on Passage Choiseul."

As he read, the magistrate watched Prosper, seeking to detect on his face the effect of his revelations.

"In the latter part of 1858," he continued, "the Chocareille girl took service with a Madame Nunez, and started for Lisbon with her. How long did she remain in Portugal? What did she do there? My reports are silent in that regard. What is certain is that in 1861 she had returned to Paris and was sentenced by the tribunal of the Seine to three months' imprisonment for assault and mayhem. By the way, she brought back from Portugal the name of Nina Gypsy."

"But, monsieur," interposed Prosper, "I assure you —"

"Yes, I understand; this story is less romantic, I doubt not, than the one that was told you; it has the merit of being true. We lose sight of Palmyre Chocareille, *alias* Gypsy, on her release from prison. But we find her again six months later, having made

the acquaintance of a commercial traveller named Caldas, who was smitten by her beauty, and furnished an apartment for her near the Bastille. She was living with him and bore his name when she left him to go with you. Have you ever heard of this Caldas?"

"Never, monsieur."

"The poor devil was so fond of that creature that he nearly went mad with grief when he learned that she had abandoned him. He was an energetic fellow, it seems, and he had sworn publicly that he would kill the man who had stolen his mistress from him. There is reason to believe that he has committed suicide since. One thing is beyond question, and that is that he sold the furniture after the Chocareille woman left him, and that he then disappeared. Every effort to trace him proved unavailing."

The magistrate paused a moment as if to give Prosper time to reflect, then continued, emphasizing every word:—

"And that is the woman whom you made your companion, the woman for whom you stole!"

Once more M. Patrigent, misled by the incomplete disclosures of Fanferlot, was following a false scent. He had hoped to extort a shriek from Prosper's passion, wounded to the quick; but no, he remained unmoved. Of all that the magistrate had said to him, he retained only the name of the poor drummer who had killed himself: Caldas.

"At least you will admit," persisted M. Patrigent, "that this girl caused your ruin."

"I cannot admit it, monsieur, for it is not the fact."

"But she has been the cause of your largest expenditures of money,—and see;" he drew a bill from

the file of papers — “in the single month of December last you paid a dress-maker, Monsieur Van-Klopen, on her account 900 francs for two dinner dresses, 700 francs for an evening dress, and 400 francs for a domino trimmed with lace.”

“All that money was expended by me freely, but coldly and without enthusiasm.”

M. Patrigent shrugged his shoulders.

“You deny the evidence,” he said. “Will you maintain also that it was not on this girl’s account that you abandoned habits of several years’ standing and ceased to pass your evenings with your employer’s family?”

“Indeed it was not on her account, monsieur; I assure you it was not.”

“In that case why did you suddenly absent yourself from a house where you had seemed to be paying court to a young woman whose hand would have been freely bestowed on you, as M. Fauvel tells me, and as you wrote to your father?”

“I had reasons which I cannot tell,” replied Prosper, in a trembling voice.

The magistrate drew a long breath. At last he had found a flaw in the prisoner’s armor.

“Can it be that Mademoiselle Madeleine kept you at a distance?”

Prosper held his peace. He was plainly very much agitated.

“Speak,” insisted M. Patrigent; “it is my duty to warn you that this is one of the most serious circumstances in the eyes of the prosecution.”

“Whatever risk I may run by keeping silent, I must do it.”

“Beware,” said the magistrate; “the law cannot be put off with conscientious scruples.”

M. Patrigent paused, awaiting a reply, but it was not forthcoming.

"You persist?" he continued; "very good! let us go on. You have spent 50,000 francs, you say, in a year. The prosecution says 70,000; but let us take your figure. Your resources are exhausted, your credit is gone, to continue your mode of life is impossible; what did you expect to do?"

"I had no plan, monsieur; I had said to myself that I would let it go on as long as it could, and then —"

"And then you would put your hand in the safe, eh?"

"Why, monsieur," cried Prosper, "if I were guilty I should not be here! I should not have been such an idiot as to return to my office; I should have fled —"

M. Patrigent could not restrain a smile of satisfaction.

"At last!" he said; "that's the argument I have been expecting. By the very fact of not taking flight, of remaining to face the storm, you prove your shrewdness. Several recent prosecutions have taught unfaithful cashiers that flight to a foreign country is a hazardous expedient. The railway train moves quickly, but the electric telegraph outstrips it. Belgium is only two steps away. In London a French thief can be found in forty-eight hours at the outside. Even America is no longer a sure refuge. Being prudent and wise, you remained in Paris, saying to yourself: 'I can get out of it somehow, and at the worst, if I am convicted, after three or four years' imprisonment I shall have a fortune waiting for me.' Many people would sacrifice five years of their life for 350,000 francs."

"But, monsieur, if I had calculated so shrewdly as you say, I should not have been content with 350,000 francs; I should have awaited a favorable opportunity and stolen a million."

"Oh! one cannot always wait," rejoined M. Patrigent.

Prosper reflected, and the contraction of his features betrayed the mental effort he was making.

"Monsieur," he said at last, "there is one detail which I had forgotten in my distress, which comes to my mind now and may aid in my justification."

"Explain yourself."

"The messenger who went to the Bank to draw the money brought it back to me when I was simply awaiting his return before going away for the night. I am sure, yes, I am perfectly sure that I locked up the bank-notes in his presence. Oh! if he noticed that! At all events, I left my office before he did."

"Very good," said M. Patrigent; "the man's deposition shall be taken. Now you will be taken back to your cell; follow my advice and reflect."

M. Patrigent's reason for dismissing his prisoner thus abruptly was that this new fact, suddenly disclosed, disturbed him. The deposition of the messenger assumed immense importance. What was he to think if that man should declare that he saw the cashier lock up the notes and go away? Was it impossible that he had been corrupted beforehand by Prosper?

As soon as Prosper had disappeared, he said to his clerk: —

"Sigault, this messenger referred to by the prisoner, this Antonin, is the man, is he not, who did not come to testify, and was excused on a physician's certificate?"

"The very same, monsieur."

"Where does he live?"

"He is not at home, monsieur, so Fanferlot tells me. As his wound was serious and likely to keep him in bed a long while, he has gone to the Dubois Hospital."

"Very good! I will go there and question him to-day, at once. Take all you require and send for a cab."

It is a long way from the Palais de Justice to the Dubois Hospital, but M. Patrigent's cabman, spurred on by the promise of a magnificent *pourboire*, succeeded in urging his sorry nags to the speed of thoroughbreds.

Would Antonin be in a condition to answer? That was the question. But the superintendent of the hospital speedily reassured the magistrate in that respect. The unfortunate messenger had broken his knee-pan when he fell; he was suffering horribly, but his mind was perfectly clear.

"Since that is the case, monsieur," said the magistrate, "I will ask you to take me to him, for I must examine him; but if possible it is most essential that no one should hear his deposition."

"Oh! no one shall come in," said the superintendent; "he is in a room with four beds, to be sure, but he is all alone there."

"Very good! let us go, then."

When he saw the examining magistrate enter the room, followed by a tall, thin young man carrying an advocate's satchel, Antonin, who was a knowing fellow, guessed what was in the wind.

"Ah!" said he, "monsieur has come about M. Bertomy's matter?"

"Exactly."

M. Patrigent remained standing by the patient's bed, while Sigault arranged his papers on a small table.

When the messenger had answered all the customary questions, had deposed that his name was Antonin Poche, age forty years, born at Cadaujac (Gironde), unmarried, the magistrate continued:—

"Well, my man, do you feel well enough to answer my questions?"

"Perfectly, monsieur."

"Was it you who went to the Bank on February 27th to draw the 350,000 francs that were stolen?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"At what time did you return?"

"Quite late; I had an errand at the Crédit Mobilier on leaving the Bank; it must have been five o'clock when I got back to the house."

"Do you remember what M. Bertomy did when you handed him the money? Don't hurry about answering, but search your memory thoroughly."

"Wait—first he counted the notes and tied them in four packages, which he put in the safe, and then—he locked the safe, and then—it seems to me—yes, I can't be mistaken—yes, then he went out."

He said these last words so eagerly that he forgot his knee and made a movement which extorted a cry of pain from him.

"You are quite sure of what you say?" demanded the examining magistrate.

His solemn tone seemed to alarm Antonin.

"Sure!" he rejoined with palpable hesitation, "you understand—I would stake my head on it, but that's as sure as I am."

It was impossible to induce him to say anything more definite. He had been frightened, he fancied

that he had compromised himself, and he would have retracted for a trifle.

However, the effect was none the less certain, and as he left the room M. Patrigent said to his clerk: —

“This is a serious matter! very serious!”

VI

THE Hôtel du Grand-Archange, Madame Gypsy's place of refuge, is the most magnificent hostelry on Quai Saint-Michel. When one pays his two weeks' board in advance and “on the dot,” he is treated with consideration there.

Madame Alexandre, who was once a fine-looking woman, is now a powerful creature, with corsets laced shockingly tight, always over-dressed, with a great liking for gold chains falling in cascades down the slopes of her robust bosom. Her eye is still keen and her teeth white, but alas! her nose is red. The fact is that of all her tastes, and God knows she has had enough of them in her lifetime, and of all sorts, a single one has survived, the taste for good cheer liberally watered. Excuse me; she adores her husband too, and at the moment when M. Patrigent left the hospital she was waxing impatient because her “little man” did not return to dinner. She was even on the point of sitting down without him, when the office-boy called out: —

“Here is monsieur.”

And Fanferlot in person appeared in the doorway.

Three years before, Fanferlot kept a little office for procuring information secretly; Madame Alexandre, a dealer in second-hand clothes without a license, called upon him to watch some suspicious

creditors; hence their first relations. If they were honestly married at the mayor's office and the church, it was because it seemed to them that the ceremony would have the effect of a baptism and wash away their past.

On the day of his marriage Fanferlot abandoned his private inquiry office and entered the service of the Prefecture, where he had previously been employed, and Madame Alexandre renounced trade. Combining their savings, they hired and furnished the Grand-Archange, and flourished there, being esteemed, or nearly so, in the neighborhood, where Fanferlot's connection with the Prefecture of Police was unsuspected.

"How late you are, my little man!" she cried, dropping the soup spoon to run and kiss him.

But he received her caresses with a distraught air.

"I am played out," he said; "I have been playing billiards all day with Evariste, M. Fauvel's valet, and I let him win as much as he chose; a fellow who does n't know what a *massé* shot is! I made his acquaintance day before yesterday, and now I'm his best friend. If I choose to enter the banker's service as messenger in Antonin's place, I am sure of M. Evariste's good offices."

"What! you a bank messenger?"

"*Dame!* yes, if I must do it, in order to obtain a clear idea of the Fauvel household and study my characters at close quarters."

"Has n't the valet told you anything?"

"Nothing that will be of any use to me, and yet I have turned him inside out like a glove. He's such a man as you never saw, that banker. He has n't a vice, so Evariste tells me, not even a paltry little peccadillo by which his valet can earn ten sous.

He does n't smoke, he does n't drink, he never gambles, he has no mistresses,— a saint, I tell you! He's worth millions, and he lives meanly, stingily, like a grocer; he is mad over his wife, he adores his children, he often receives company, but goes out very seldom."

"Is his wife young, pray?"

"She must be all of fifty."

Madame Alexandre reflected an instant.

"Did you inquire about the other members of the family?" she asked.

"Certainly. One of the sons is an officer, I don't know where; we'll leave him out; he's the younger one. The older, Lucien, who lives with his parents, is apparently a veritable maiden for virtue."

"And the wife, and the niece you mentioned the other day?"

"Evariste could tell me nothing about them."

Madame Alexandre shrugged her shoulders.

"If you have found out nothing," she said, "it's because there is nothing there. Look you, do you know what I'd do, if I were in your place?"

"What?"

"I'd go and consult M. Lecoq."

At that name, Fanferlot jumped as if she had fired a pistol close beside his ear.

"Fine advice!" he said; "in God's name, do you want me to lose my place? If M. Lecoq so much as suspected what I have undertaken to do!"

"Who advises you to tell him your secret; go and ask his opinion with an indifferent air, remember what he may say that's worth remembering, and then act as you please."

The detective seemed to weigh his wife's arguments.

"Perhaps you are right," he said; "and yet he's devilish shrewd, is M. Lecoq, and quite capable of seeing through me."

"Shrewd!" repeated Madame Alexandre, in an injured tone, "shrewd! it's you people at the Prefecture who have made his reputation just by repeating that."

"Well," was Fanferlot's conclusion, "I'll see about it, I'll think it over; but meanwhile what says the little one?"

The "little one" was Madame Nina Gypsy. On taking up her abode at the Grand-Archange, the poor girl had believed that she was following well-meant advice, and even now, Fanferlot not having shown himself, she was still convinced that she was acting in obedience to a friend of Prosper. When she received the summons from M. Patrigent, she had marvelled at the skill of the police, who had succeeded so soon in discovering her hiding-place; for she had taken rooms at the hotel under a false name,—that is to say, under her real name, Palmyre Chocareille.

When skilfully questioned by the former old-clothes dealer, she had unbosomed herself without suspicion, and had told her whole story. Thus it was that Fanferlot, at very small expense, had been able to pose before the magistrate as a detective of superior skill.

"The little one," Madame Alexandre replied, "is still upstairs and she suspects nothing. But it is getting to be more and more difficult to hold her. I don't know what the magistrate said to her, but she was beside herself when she came back. She wanted to go and make a row at M. Fauvel's. Just now, after an outbreak of anger, she wrote a letter and gave it to Jean to post; but I kept it to show you."

"What!" exclaimed Fanferlot; "you have a letter, and you don't tell me of it, when perhaps it contains the key to the enigma! Give it to me, quick!"

At her husband's command the ex-slopseller opened a small bag and took from it Madame Gypsy's letter, which she handed to him.

"Here it is," she said; "let that content you."

In truth Palmyre Chocareille was not a bad pen-woman for an ex-lady's-maid. The superscription of her letter, written in a fine English hand, was thus conceived:—

Monsieur L. DE CLAMERAN, iron-master,
at the Hôtel du Louvre.
For M. RAOUL DE LAGORS.
(Very important.)

"Oho!" said Fanferlot, accompanying his exclamation with a little hissing sound which he commonly makes when he thinks he has made a discovery—"oho!"

"Are you going to open it?" queried Madame Alexandre.

"Well, rather," rejoined Fanferlot, removing the seal with marvellous dexterity.

He read, and Madame Alexandre, leaning over her "little man's" shoulder, also read:—

MONSIEUR RAOUL, — Prosper is in prison, accused of a theft which I am sure he did not commit. I wrote you on this subject three days ago —

"What! what's that?" Fanferlot exclaimed, interrupting his reading; "this hussy wrote a letter and I did n't see it!"

"But, my dear little man, the wretch may have put her letter into the post herself when she went to the Palais de Justice."

"True, that is possible," said Fanferlot, somewhat less excited.

He resumed the reading: —

— I wrote you on this subject, and I hear nothing from you. Who will come to Prosper's assistance, if his best friends abandon him? If you leave this letter unanswered I shall consider myself freed from a certain promise you know of, and, without further scruple, I shall tell Prosper about the conversation I overheard between you and M. de Clameran. But I can count upon you, can I not? I shall expect you day after to-morrow, between twelve o'clock and four, at the Hôtel du Grand-Archange.

NINA GYPSY.

Having read the letter, Fanferlot without a word, began to copy it.

"Well!" queried Madame Alexandre, "what do you say to it?"

Fanferlot carefully placed the letter in its envelope and was replacing the seal, when the door of the "hotel office" suddenly opened, and the clerk whistled twice: "*Psitt! psitt!*"

Fanferlot with wonderful agility disappeared in a dark closet which opened off the dining-room. He had not time to close the door when Madame Gypsy appeared.

Alas! she was shockingly changed, poor girl. She had lost all her color, her cheeks were hollow, her lips had lost their tempting brilliancy, and her eyes, glowing with the flames of fever, reddened by weeping, were surrounded by great dark circles.

Madame Alexandre could not restrain an exclamation of surprise when she saw her.

"What, my dear child, going out?"

"I must, madame, and I have come to ask you, if

any one should call for me in my absence, to be good enough to tell them to wait."

"But where are you going, in Heaven's name, at this hour, ill as you are?"

Madame Gypsy hesitated a moment.

"Oh!" she said at last, "I can trust you, who have been so kind to me; here, read this letter which a messenger just brought up to me."

"What!" said Madame Alexandre, completely taken aback, "a messenger? in my house? who went up to your room?"

"What is there so surprising in that?"

"Oh! nothing, nothing," replied the ex-tradeswoman.

And she read very loud, in order to be heard distinctly in the closet: —

"A friend of Prosper, who can neither receive you nor call upon you, must speak to you without fail. This, Monday, evening, at nine o'clock precisely, be at the omnibus office opposite the Tour Saint Jacques, and the writer of this will join you and say what he has to say.

"I appoint this place for our meeting in order to remove any possibility of fear from your mind."

"And you are going to keep this appointment?" cried Madame Alexandre.

"Surely."

"But it is horribly imprudent, perfect madness; they are setting a trap for you."

"Well, what does it matter, madame?" rejoined Gypsy; "I am unhappy enough now to have nothing more to fear."

And refusing to listen to another word, she went out.

Madame Gypsy was not in the street when Fanfer-

lot rushed out of his hiding-place. The mild-mannered detective was livid with rage and swearing like one possessed.

"Ten million devils!" he cried; "for God's sake, what is this Grand-Archange, where people go in and out as freely as on a public square?"

The quondam dealer in old clothes, disconcerted, trembling with fear, did not know what to say.

"Did ever any one hear of such a thing?" continued the detective; "a messenger came here and no one saw him! How did he manage to get into the house so secretly? Ah! I scent some rascality under this. And you, Madame Alexandre, a woman of intelligence, are foolish enough to advise the little viper against keeping this appointment!"

"But, my dear —"

"What! can't you understand that I propose to follow her, and in that way find out what she is hiding from us? Come quick, and help me; she must not be able to recognize me."

In a turn of the hand Fanferlot was arrayed in a wig and heavy beard and completely disguised. He had donned a blouse, and had all the appearance of one of those workmen who seek work praying God that they may not find it. When he was ready Madame Alexandre, always anxious for his welfare, asked him: —

"Have you your card and your club?"

"Yes, yes! send the hussy's letter to M. de Clameran to the post, and — keep your eyes open."

And, paying no heed to his wife's cry of "Good luck!" Fanferlot darted from the house.

Madame Gypsy had eight or ten minutes' start of him, but he speedily made up the distance. He took the road which the young woman was likely to have

taken, and, by running, overtook her about in the middle of Pont du Change.

She was walking at an undecided gait, sometimes very rapidly, sometimes almost creeping along, like one who, in her impatience to keep an appointment, had started too soon and was trying to use up the time. She walked around Place du Châtelet two or three times, read the theatre posters, sat down a moment on a bench, and finally, at about quarter to nine, installed herself on one of the benches in the omnibus office.

Fanferlot entered a moment after her. But as he feared Madame Gypsy's sharp eye, despite his heavy beard, he took his seat in the shadow, on the other side of the office.

"A strange place to meet!" he thought, as he watched the young woman. "But who can have made this appointment with her? From the curiosity I can read in her eyes, from her evident uneasiness, I would swear that she does n't know whom she's waiting for!"

The office was full of people. Every moment porters shouted out the destination of an omnibus that drove up. Many people went in and out, claiming their seats or exchanging their tickets. At every new arrival Gypsy started, and Fanferlot said to himself, "Is this the man?"

At last, as the clock on the Hôtel-de-Ville was striking nine, a person entered, and without stopping at the desk for a ticket went straight to Madame Gypsy, bowed to her, and sat down beside her. He was a man of medium height, rather stout, wearing thick side-whiskers of a brilliant shade of red, on an inflamed face. His dress, which was that of a tradesman in comfortable circumstances, was in no wise remarkable, nor was his general appearance.

Fanferlot stared at him with all his eyes.

"Wherever I may meet you now, my man," he thought, "I shall know you; and this very night I will follow you and find out who you are."

Unfortunately, he opened his ears to no purpose; he could hear absolutely nothing of what the newcomer and Madame Gypsy were saying. All that he could do was to try and divine the subject of their conversation from their pantomime and the play of their features.

At first, when the stout man accosted her, the young woman seemed so surprised that it was evident that she had never seen him before. When, after seating himself, he said a few words to her, she half rose, with a gesture of alarm, as if she would have fled. A single glance from him was enough to make her resume her seat. Then, as the stout man continued to talk, Gypsy's manner betrayed keen apprehension. She made a negative gesture, but seemed to yield to some good reason which was laid before her. At one moment she seemed on the point of weeping, and almost immediately a smile lighted up her pretty face. At last she held out her hand as if she were taking an oath.

But what did that mean? Fanferlot on his bench gnawed his fingers in his vexation.

"Idiot that I was!" he said to himself, "to station myself at such a distance."

He was meditating some adroit manœuvre to approach them without arousing suspicion, when the stout man rose and offered his arm to Madame Gypsy, who accepted it without ado, and they walked toward the door together.

They both seemed so fully preoccupied that Fanferlot could see no objection to following close upon

their heels, — a wise precaution, for there was a crowd on the boulevard. When he reached the door he saw the stout man and Gypsy cross the sidewalk, hail a cab not far from the omnibus office, and enter it.

"Good!" muttered Fanferlot, "I have them now, there is no need of hurrying."

While the cabman was gathering up his reins, the detective made ready for a run, and when the cab started, in three leaps he was close behind it, determined to follow it to the end of the world.

The cab went up Boulevard de Sébastopol. It moved rapidly, but not without reason was Fanferlot nicknamed The Squirrel. With his elbows close to his body, and saving his breath, he held his own. But on reaching Boulevard Saint-Denis he began to puff, and he was conscious of a slight pain in his side, when the cab, after crossing the boulevard, turned into Rue du Faubourg-Saint-Michel. But Fanferlot, who, at eight years of age, was a mischievous vagabond on the Paris streets, is a man of resource. He grasped the springs of the carriage, pulled himself up by his wrists, and hung there with his legs resting on the rear axle. He was not comfortable, to be sure, but he was no longer in danger of being distanced.

"Now," he said, laughing in his false beard, "whip 'em up, cabbie!"

The cabman did, in very truth, lash his horses, and drove up the steep incline of Rue du Faubourg-Saint-Martin at a fast trot. At last, on the square where the old barrier used to stand, the cab stopped in front of a wine-shop, the driver alighted from his box, and went in to get a drink. The detective quitted his uncomfortable position, and stood out of sight in a doorway, waiting for Gypsy and the stout man to appear, and ready to dart after them.

But five minutes passed and they had not alighted.

"What are they doing?" thought the agent.

He approached the cab, not without precautions. Oh, horror! the cab was empty! It was as if a pail of iced water had been emptied on Fanferlot's head; he stood there, as if glued to the ground, more thoroughly crystallized than Lot's wife. When, after a few seconds, he recovered himself somewhat, he rolled out a dozen oaths calculated to make all the windows in the quarter rattle.

"Cheated!" he said, "bilked, fooled, bamboozled, gulled! Ah! they shall pay me for it!"

In an instant his active mind ran through the list of contingencies, probable and improbable.

"Evidently," he muttered, "that fellow and Gypsy went in at one door and out at the other; it's an elementary trick. But their resorting to it shows that they were afraid of being followed. If they are afraid of being followed, it must be because their consciences are not clear, so —"

He broke off his monologue because it occurred to him to question the cabman, who might very well know something. Unluckily, the cabman, who was in a very ill humor, refused to say anything, and even shook his whip in a manner so far from reassuring that Fanferlot deemed it prudent to beat a retreat.

"The deuce!" he said to himself; "can it be that the cabman is in the game too?"

What was he to do now? He had not an idea. Gloomily he wended his way to Quai Saint-Michel, and it was at least half-past eleven when he rang at his door.

"Has the little one returned?" he asked first of all.

"No, but here are two large packages that have come for her."

Quickly and with superior dexterity Fanferlot opened the parcels. They contained three cotton dresses, heavy shoes, some very plain underwear, and linen caps.

The detective could not repress a gesture of irritation.

"Damnation!" he said; "so she's going to disguise herself now; on my word! I'm completely astray."

It is a fact that, when Fanferlot was pensively descending from the heights of Faubourg Saint-Martin, he had taken a vow that he would not tell his wife of his discomfiture. But once in his own house, confronted by a new fact of a nature to put all his conjectures to rout, his regard for his self-esteem vanished. The detective made a clean breast of everything: his hopes so near realization, his incredible misadventure, his suspicions! And the husband and wife remained for a long time in consultation, studying the affair on every side, seeking a plausible explanation.

They had fully determined not to go to bed until Madame Gypsy had returned, for Madame Alexandre proposed to extort some information from her. But would she return? That was the question.

She did return shortly after one o'clock, when the husband and wife were beginning to despair and to say to each other, "We shall never see her again."

At the first stroke of the bell, Fanferlot slipped into the dark closet, and Madame Alexandre was left alone in the office of the hotel.

"Here you are at last, dear child!" she cried; "nothing has happened to you! Ah! I was mortally anxious."

"Thanks for your interest, madame," replied

Gypsy; "but has nothing been brought here for me?"

She was in a very different frame of mind from that in which she had left the house, was poor Gypsy; she was still sad, to be sure, but no longer downcast. Her prostration of the preceding days had given place to a firm and noble-hearted resolution, which was revealed by her bearing and the gleam in her eyes.

"Some one brought these parcels that you see," replied Madame Alexandre; "so you have seen M. Bertomy's friend, have you?"

"Yes, madame, and his advice has changed my plans so completely that to-morrow I shall be obliged, I regret to say, to bid you farewell; I am going away."

"To-morrow!" exclaimed the former old-clothes dealer; "is there something new?"

"Oh! nothing to interest you."

And, having lighted her candle at the gas-jet, Madame Gypsy retired, after a most significant "*Bon soir; bonne nuit.*"

"What do you think of this home-coming, Madame Alexandre?" asked Fanferlot, coming from his hiding-place.

"It's beyond belief! The little vixen writes to M. de Clameran, making an appointment here, and then does n't wait for him."

"She evidently distrusts us; she knows who I am."

"Then this friend of the cashier's must have told her."

"Who knows? Look you, I am beginning to believe that I have to do with some very clever burglars; they have guessed that I am on their track, and they are trying to throw me off. If I should be

told to-morrow that this hussy has the money and has run away with it, I should n't be surprised."

"That's not my opinion," rejoined Madame Alexandre; "but listen to me; I return to my original idea,—you ought to go and see M. Lecoq."

Fanferlot sat for a moment in deep thought.

"All right! so be it; I will go and see him, but only to set my conscience at rest; for where I have seen nothing, he will see nothing. He may be as terrible as he pleases, he can't frighten me. If he should undertake to find fault with me and be overbearing, I shall know how to teach him his place."

But for all that, the detective slept poorly that night, or, to speak more accurately, he did not sleep at all, being more absorbed by the Bertomy case than a dramatist by the play that is germinating in his brain. At half-past six he was up and dressed—one must be up early to catch M. Lecoq—and having hastily swallowed a cup of *café au lait*, he betook himself to the famous detective's abode.

Certainly Fanferlot, *alias* The Squirrel, is not afraid of "the patron" as he calls him; and in proof thereof we cite the fact that he started from the Grand-Archange with his head in the air and his hat on one side. But, by the time he reached Rue Montmartre, where M. Lecoq lives, his swagger had sensibly diminished. His heart beat a little faster as he entered the hall of the house, and he stopped several times as he climbed the stairs.

Arrived at the third floor, in front of a door embellished with the famous thief-catcher's crest,—a rooster, the symbol of vigilance,—his heart almost failed him, and he had some difficulty in making up his mind to ring.

M. Lecoq's maid-servant, an ex-convict with the

figure of a carabineer, and more devoted to her master than a shepherd's dog, — Janouille, in fact, — opened the door.

"Ah!" she said, when she saw who it was, "you come in the nick of time, Master Squirrel, the master is expecting you."

At this announcement Fanferlot was seized by a violent longing to beat a retreat. Why, — how, — by what strange chance was he expected? ..

But, while he hesitated, Janouille seized his arm, and, drawing him toward her, forced him to enter the room, saying: —

"Do you mean to take root there? Come, hurry up, the master's working in his study."

In the centre of an enormous room, oddly furnished, half literary-man's library, half actor's dressing-room, sat writing the same individual with gold-bowed spectacles who had whispered "Courage!" to Prosper Bertomy in the corridor of the prefecture. It was M. Lecoq in his official guise.

At the entrance of Fanferlot, who came forward respectfully with his backbone rounded like a hoop, he partly raised his head, laid down his pen, and said: —

"Ah! here you are at last, eh, my boy? Well, so the Bertomy case halts a bit?"

"What!" stammered Fanferlot, "you know —"

"I know that you have bungled things so that you can no longer see your way, — that you have surrendered."

"But, patron, it's not I —"

M. Lecoq had risen and was pacing the floor. He turned abruptly upon Fanferlot.

"What think you, Master Squirrel," he asked in a stern, satirical tone, "of a man who abuses the con-

fidence of those who employ him, who discloses just enough of what he discovers to lead the prosecution astray, who betrays to the profit of his idiotic vanity both the cause of justice and that of an unfortunate prisoner?"

Fanferlot recoiled a step, in dismay.

"I should say," he said, "I should say —"

"You think that such a man ought to be punished and discharged from his office; and you are right. The less honored a profession is, the more honorable they should be who practise it. But you are a traitor, Ah! Master Squirrel, we are ambitious, and we try to do fancy detective work. We let the law go astray in one direction while we search in another direction. One must be a hound with a keener scent than yours, my boy, to hunt without a huntsman and on his own account."

"But, patron, I swear —"

"Hush. Would you try to prove to me that you have told the examining magistrate everything, as it was your duty to do? Nonsense! While he is collecting evidence against the cashier, you are at work against the banker; you set spies on him, and form an intimacy with his valet."

Was M. Lecoq really angry? Fanferlot, who knew him well, had some doubt on the subject, but with that devil of a man one never knows what to think.

"If you were even shrewd with it all," he continued; "but no. You want to be master and you're not even a good journeyman."

"You are right, patron," said Fanferlot, piteously, no longer thinking of protesting. "But how is one to go to work in a case like this, where there isn't a trace, not a compromising paper, not a clew, nothing at all!"

M. Lecoq shrugged his shoulders.

"Poor boy!" said he. "Let me tell you that on the day when you were summoned with the inspector to establish the fact of the theft, you had — I do not say certainly, but very probably — in your two great stupid hands, a means of finding out which of the two keys, the banker's or the cashier's, was used in committing the theft."

"Upon my word!"

"You want proofs? Very good. Do you remember the scratch you discovered on the door of the safe? It impressed you, for you could n't hold back an exclamation when you spied it. You examined it carefully with a magnifying glass, and you convinced yourself that it was still quite fresh, quite recent. You said to yourself, and justly, that that scratch was made at the moment of the theft. Now, with what was it made? Evidently with a key. That being so, you should have examined the banker's key and the cashier's, and examined them with the greatest care. One of them would probably have kept on the end some atoms at least of the green paint used in painting safe-doors."

Fanferlot had listened to this explanation open-mouthed. At the last words he struck his forehead violently, crying: —

"Imbecile!"

"You have said it," observed M. Lecoq; "imbecile! Think of it! that clew stares you in the face and you neglect it and draw no conclusion from it! And yet that is the true, the only starting-point of the affair. If I find the culprit, it will be with the aid of that scratch; and I shall find him, I will find him!"

At a distance Fanferlot, *alias* The Squirrel, freely speaks ill of M. Lecoq and bravely defies him; but

in his presence he yields to the irresistible influence which this extraordinary man exerts over all who come in contact with him.

The precise information, the minute details which had been put before him overturned all his ideas. Where and how had M. Lecoq obtained them?

"Have you been looking into this affair, patron?" he asked.

"Perhaps. But I am not infallible; I may have let some valuable clew escape me. Take a chair and tell me all you know."

One does not equivocate with M. Lecoq, nor play tricks with him. Fanferlot was entirely frank, which rarely happens with him. But, feeling a sort of remorse on his vanity's account, he omitted to tell, toward the close of his story, how he had allowed himself to be cozened by Madame Gypsy and the stout man on the preceding evening.

But unfortunately M. Lecoq is never half-informed.

"It seems to me, Master Squirrel," he observed, "that you have forgotten something. How far did you follow the empty cab?"

Fanferlot, despite his self-possession, blushed to his ears and looked down at the floor, for all the world like a school-girl caught tripping.

"What, patron," he stammered, "you know that too? How can you —"

But as a sudden thought passed through his mind, he stopped short, jumped from his chair and cried: —

"Oh! I see — that stout man with the red whiskers was you!"

Fanferlot's surprise imparted such a strange expression to his face that M. Lecoq could not restrain a smile.

"So it was you," continued the stupefied detective,

"that stout man that I stared at so long—and I didn't recognize you! Ah! patron, what an actor you would make, if you chose! I was disguised too!"

"And very badly, my poor boy; I must do you that justice. Do you think that a heavy beard and a blouse are all you need to be unrecognizable? What about the eye, you rascal? what about the eye? The eye is what you must change. That is the whole secret."

This theory of the great importance of the glance in matters of disguise explains why the official Lecoq, who could give points to the lynx, is never met in the corridors of the prefecture without his gold-bowed spectacles.

"But in that case, patron," said Fanferlot, pursuing his idea, "in that case you must have confessed that little woman, whom Madame Alexandre has never succeeded in doing anything with? You know why she leaves the Grand-Archange, why she doesn't wait for M. de Clameran, why she has been buying calico dresses?"

"She is acting entirely in accordance with my advice."

"In that case," said the police agent, utterly discouraged, "it only remains for me to admit that I am nothing but a poor fool."

"No, Squirrel," rejoined M. Lecoq, kindly, "no, you're not a fool. You have simply made the mistake of undertaking a job that's beyond your powers. Have you taken a single step in the affair since you have been following it up? Not one. The trouble is, you see, that while you are beyond praise as a lieutenant, you have n't the *sang-froid* of a general. I will make you a present of an aphorism; remember

it, and let it be the rule of your life. 'A man may shine in the second rank and be utterly eclipsed in the first.'"

Never, no never had Fanferlot seen the "patron" so talkative and so good-natured. Seeing that he was detected, he had expected a storm which would crush him; but not at all, he was let off with a shower which hardly wet his hair. M. Lecoq's wrath vanished like the black clouds which appear threateningly for a moment on the horizon and are scattered by a gust of wind.

However, Madame Alexandre's husband was uneasy; he wondered if that extraordinary amiability was not a cloak for some ulterior project.

"Tell me, patron," he said, "do you know the thief?"

"No more than you, my boy; indeed, while you have an opinion all formed, I do not as yet know what to think. You declare that the cashier is innocent and the banker guilty, and I don't know whether you are right or wrong. Having come after you, I am still engaged in the preliminaries of my investigation. I am certain of only one thing, that there's a scratch on the safe-door. That is what I start from."

As he spoke M. Lecoq had taken from the desk, unrolled, and spread out an enormous sheet of drawing paper. On it the door of M. Fauvel's safe was photographed. All the details were reproduced with the greatest exactness. The five movable buttons could be seen, with the letters engraved on them, and the narrow keyhole with its copper shield. The scratch was indicated with remarkable distinctness.

"Here, then, is our scratch," began M. Lecoq. "It runs diagonally up and down, starting from the keyhole, and, observe, from left to right; that is to say,

it ends on the side next the secret stairway leading to the banker's apartments. It is quite deep near the lock and is hardly perceptible at the end."

"Yes, master, I see, I see."

"Naturally you thought that this scratch must have been made by the perpetrator of the theft. Let us see if you are right. I have here a small iron chest, painted green like M. Fauvel's safe; here it is. Take a key and try to scratch it."

With no very clear idea of the object his superior had in view, the detective did as he was told, rubbing the end of the key energetically on the chest.

"The devil!" he exclaimed, after two or three trials, "this paint is hard to mar."

"Very hard; that is true, my boy, and that on the safe is harder still; I have satisfied myself of that. Therefore the scratch that you discovered could not have been made by the trembling hand of a thief dropping the key!"

"*Sapristi!*" exclaimed Fanferlot in stupefaction; "I should never have thought of that. It is very clear that, in order to scratch the safe, they must have pressed very hard."

"Yes, but why? As you see me, I have been cudgelling my brain for three days, and not till yesterday did I discover the explanation. Let us examine my suppositions together, and see if they present sufficient elements of probability to become the starting-point of my investigation."

M. Lecoq had laid aside the photograph and gone to the door leading from his study to his bedroom, removing the key, which he held in his hand.

"Come here and stand beside me," he said to Fanferlot. "Good. Let us suppose that I want to open this door and that you don't want me to.

When you see me put the key in the lock, what movement do you instinctively make?"

"I put both my hands on your arm and pull it toward me with all my might, so that you can't put the key in."

"Just so. Now let us repeat the movement; go on."

Fanferlot obeyed, and the key which M. Lecoq held, being turned aside from the lock, dragged along the door and made a perfectly distinct scratch, diagonally, from top to bottom,—an exact reproduction of that in the photograph.

"Oh! oh! oh!" exclaimed Madame Alexandre's husband, in three different tones.

And he stood in silent contemplation before the door.

"Do you begin to understand?" asked M. Lecoq.

"Do I understand! Why a child could understand now. Ah! what a man you are! I can see the whole scene as if I were there. At the moment of the theft there were two people by the safe; one wanted to take the notes, the other was determined that he should n't touch them. That is clear, that is evident, that is certain."

Accustomed as he was to much more signal triumphs, the famous detective was highly amused at the other's amazement and enthusiasm.

"There you go again," he said gently; "you take for certain, as if it were proved, a circumstance which may be accidental, and at the best is only probable."

"No, patron, no!" cried Fanferlot; "a man like you never makes a mistake; there is no possible doubt."

"Then it is for you to make the most of our discovery."

"In the first place, it proves that my scent did not deceive me; the cashier is innocent."

"Why so?"

"Because, being at liberty to open and close the safe whenever he chose, he would not have gone to seek a witness just when he was going to steal the money."

"Well reasoned. But, on that theory, the banker is innocent too; reflect a bit."

Fanferlot reflected and all his animation vanished.

"It is true," he said, with a despairing gesture.

"It is true! What are we to do now?"

"Look for the third thief, that is to say, the one who opened the safe and took the notes, and who is sleeping in peace while others are under suspicion."

"Impossible, patron, impossible! Has nobody told you that no one but M. Fauvel and his cashier had keys, and that they were never out of their possession?"

"Pardon; on the night of the theft the banker had left his in his secretary."

"But the key is n't sufficient to open the safe; you must have the word too."

M. Lecoq shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"What was the word?" he demanded.

"Gypsy."

"That is to say, the name of the cashier's mistress. Very good, my boy, search! On the day that you find a man sufficiently intimate with Prosper to have an inkling of the word, sufficiently at home in M. Fauvel's house to be able to go to his bedroom, on that day you will have the true culprit; the problem will be solved."

An egoist, like all great artists, M. Lecoq has never had pupils, and does not seek to have them.

He works alone. He detests collaborators, being averse to a division of the joys of triumph or of the bitterness of defeat.

And so Fanferlot, who knew the "patron" from head to foot, was surprised to hear him, who never gives aught but orders, actually giving advice. Indeed, he was so puzzled by it that, notwithstanding more engrossing subjects for meditation, he could not refrain from expressing his surprise.

"You must have a very great personal interest in this case, patron," he ventured to say, "to have studied it so carefully."

M. Lecoq started nervously, but his subordinate did not detect it; then his eyebrows came together and his voice was stern when he retorted:—

"It's your profession to be inquisitive, Master Squirrel, but you must n't overdo it, do you understand?"

Fanferlot tried to make excuses.

"All right! all right!" M. Lecoq interrupted. "If I give you a lift, it's because it suits me to do it. It pleases me to be the head, while you are the arm. Alone, and with your preconceived ideas, you would never have found the guilty man; together we will find him, or my name's not Lecoq!"

"We shall succeed, since you have taken a hand in it."

"Yes, I have taken a hand in it, and in four days I have learned many things. But remember this: I have reasons for not being known in this affair. Whatever happens, I forbid you to mention my name. If we succeed, our success must be attributed to you alone. And above all things, do not try to find out anything more, but be content with such explanations as I choose to give you."

These conditions seemed in no wise to displease the detective.

"I will be close-mouthed, patron," he said.

"I rely on it, my boy. To begin with, you will take this photograph of the safe and go with it to the examining magistrate. M. Patrigent, I know, is as perplexed as possible on the subject of the prisoner. You will explain to him, as an idea of your own, what I have just shown you, you will repeat my demonstrations, and these suggestions will, I am convinced, induce him to order the cashier's release. It is necessary that Prosper should be free, so that I may begin my operations."

"I understand, patron. But shall I let it appear that I suspect that the guilty man is neither the cashier nor his employer?"

"Necessarily. The authorities cannot be kept in ignorance of the fact that you are going to follow up this affair. M. Patrigent will instruct you to watch Prosper; tell him that you won't let him out of your sight. I give you my word that he will be in good hands."

"And suppose he asks me about Gypsy?"

M. Lecoq hesitated a moment.

"You will tell him," he said at last, "that you have induced her, in Prosper's interest, to take service in a family where she is watching some one whom you suspect."

Fanferlot, delighted with the turn affairs had taken, had rolled up the photograph, taken his hat, and was preparing to go. M. Lecoq detained him with a gesture.

"I have not finished," he said. "Do you know how to drive, and take care of a horse?"

"What, patron, you ask me such a question as that? me, an ex-equestrian of the Bouthor Circus!"

"True. That being the case, as soon as the magistrate has dismissed you, you will hurry home, make yourself up with the face and costume of a valet in a good family, and go with this letter to the employment agency on the corner of Passage Delorme."

"But, patron, — "

"There is no but, my boy; the agent will present you to M. de Clameran, who is looking for a valet, his last one having left him last night."

"Excuse me if I venture to suggest that you are making a mistake; M. de Clameran doesn't fulfil the required conditions; he's not a friend of the cashier."

"There you are, interrupting me already," said M. Lecoq, in his most imperious tones; "pray do what I bid you and don't worry about the rest. M. de Clameran is not a friend of Prosper, it is true, but he is the friend, the patron of M. Raoul de Lagors. Why? What is the secret of the intimacy of those two men, so far apart in age? We must find out. We must also find out who this iron-master is, who lives in Paris and in no wise troubles his head about his smelting-furnaces. A fellow to whom it has occurred to board at the Hôtel du Louvre, in the midst of a never-ending hurly-burly, is a fellow whom it is very difficult to watch. Through you I shall have an eye in his life. He has a carriage, you will drive him about, and in less than no time you will know all his connections and can give me an account of his slightest movements."

"You shall be obeyed, patron."

"One word more. M. de Clameran is a very sensitive gentleman, and even more suspicious than sensitive. You will be presented to him under the

name of Joseph Dubois. He will ask you for recommendations. Here are three which certify that you have been employed by the Marquis de Sairmeuse and the Comte de Commarin, and that you have just left the service of the Baron von Wortschen, who has returned to Germany. Open your eyes, be careful of your demeanor, keep watch on your impulses. Do your work well, but without excess of zeal. And, above all, don't be too honest, for you would arouse suspicion."

"Never fear; but where shall I report to you?"

"I will come and see you every day, until further orders; don't come near this house,—you may be followed. If anything unforeseen happens, send your wife a despatch and she will notify me. Go, and be prudent."

When the door had closed upon Fanferlot, M. Lecoq passed hastily into his bedroom. In a twinkling he had divested himself of all resemblance to a chief of bureau, starched cravat and gold spectacles, and set his thick black hair at liberty. The official Lecoq vanished, giving place to the real Lecoq, whom nobody knows, a handsome fellow with a bright eye and determined air.

But he remained himself only an instant. Seated before a dressing-table more heavily laden with pastes, essences, colors, and patches than that of any young lady of fashion, he began to make over once more the Creator's work, and to remodel his features. He worked slowly, handling his little brushes with extreme care; but, at the end of an hour, he had completed one of his daily masterpieces. When he had finished he was no longer Lecoq, but the stout, red-whiskered man whom Fanferlot had failed to recognize.

"Well!" he said, casting a last glance at his mirror, "I have forgotten nothing, I have left almost nothing to chance; all my threads are in place, and I can go ahead. If only The Squirrel wastes no time! —"

But Fanferlot was far too happy to squander a minute. He did not run, but flew to the Palais de Justice. At last he was to have an opportunity to display superior perspicacity. As for saying to himself that he was about to triumph by virtue of another's ideas, such a thought never occurred to him. The jackdaw strutting in peacock's feathers almost always acts in perfect good faith.

The result did not disappoint his hopes. If the magistrate was not fully and absolutely convinced, he did at all events admire the ingenuity of the demonstration.

"This decides me," he said as he dismissed Fanferlot; "I shall present conclusions favorable to the cashier to the Chamber of the Council, and he will very probably be released to-morrow."

And he thereupon began to draw one of those ghastly judgments of "not proven" which restore to the accused man his liberty, but not his honor; which say that he is not guilty, but do not say that he is innocent: —

"Inasmuch as sufficient evidence does not exist against the prisoner Prosper Bertomy, by virtue of Article 128 of the Criminal Code we hereby declare that there is no ground for proceeding against the said Bertomy *at the present time*, and we order that he be removed from the prison in which he is now detained, and that he be set at liberty by the keeper thereof, etc."

When he had finished he said to Sigault, his clerk: —

"Well, here is another of those crimes of which the law never finds the solution. Another file to be deposited in the archives of the office."

And he wrote with his own hand on the cover the docket number: *File No. 113.*

VII

NINE days had Prosper Bertomy been in prison, "in secret," when one morning—it was Thursday,—the turnkey came and told him of the order for his release because of lack of evidence.

He was taken to the office, where they returned to him diverse small articles which had been taken from him when he was searched on his arrival—his watch, a penknife, some trinkets—and made him sign a great sheet of paper. Then they ushered him into a dark, very narrow passage-way; a door opened and closed upon him with an ominous sound.

He was on the quay, he was alone, he was free!

Free! that is to say, the law declared itself powerless to convict him of the crime of which he was accused. Free! he could go where he chose, breathe the pure air of heaven; but he would find every door closed at his approach.

Acquittal after a trial means rehabilitation. The judgment of *not proven* leaves a never-ending doubt hovering over the man who has been arrested on suspicion. Public opinion is most pitiless in its treatment of the *secrets*!

At the moment when he was set at liberty Prosper felt the horror of his position so keenly that he could not restrain a cry of rage and hatred.

"But I am innocent," he cried, "I am innocent!"

What good did it do? Two passers-by on the quay stopped to look after him; they took him for a madman.

The Seine was there at his feet; the thought of suicide passed through his mind.

"No!" he exclaimed, "no! I have no right to kill myself. No, I will not die until I have set myself right with the world!"

Many times in his cell in the prison of the Prefecture, Prosper Bertomy had repeated the word rehabilitation. Having in his heart that hatred, premeditated in cold blood, which gives one the strength or patience to shatter or wear away all obstacles, he said to himself: "Oh! if I were only free!" Now he was free, and now for the first time did he realize the tremendous difficulties of his task. For each crime the law must have a criminal; therefore he could not hope to make clear his innocence except by producing a culprit; how was he to find him and produce him?

Desperate but not discouraged, he walked toward his former home. A thousand anxieties assailed him. What had happened in the nine days that he had been, as it were, stricken from the rolls of the living? No sound had reached his ears. The silence of the secret cells is as horrible as that of the tomb.

He walked slowly through the streets, with downcast eyes, avoiding the glance of the people he met. He who had been so proud was to be compelled to serve an apprenticeship in contempt! He was about to see faces become icy cold as he approached, and conversation cease. Every hand would be withdrawn when he should extend his.

If only he could count upon a single friend! But

what friend would believe him, when his father, the last remaining friend in the supreme crises of life, had refused to believe him?

At the very climax of his suffering, the most agonizing that one can imagine, the name of Nina Gypsy came to his lips. He had never loved her, poor girl; at times he had hated her, but at this moment the thought of her was infinitely sweet to him. It was because he felt that she loved him, because he was sure that she would never doubt, when he had told her. It was because he knew that woman remains unshaken in her faith, loyal in the midst of misfortune, although she is not always so in prosperity.

On reaching Rue Chaptal he hesitated in front of his house, as he was about to cross the threshold. He suffered with the timidity of the honest man under suspicion; he would have liked never to see a familiar face again. However, he could not stay there on the sidewalk, so he went in.

At sight of him the concierge uttered a joyful exclamation.

"Here you are at last, monsieur," he cried; "I said all the time that you would come out of it white as snow. When I read in the papers that you were accused of stealing, I said to every one who was willing to listen: 'My third-floor tenant a thief? nonsense!'"

This man's congratulations, bungling though they were perhaps, but unquestionably sincere, affected Prosper painfully. He tried to cut short any explanation.

"Madame has gone out, I suppose," he said; "do you know where she has gone?"

"Faith, no, monsieur. The day of your arrest she sent out for a cab; all her belongings were loaded on

it, and since then we've neither seen her nor heard her name mentioned."

This was an additional blow to the unhappy cashier.

"And what has become of my servants?"

"Gone too, monsieur. Your father paid them and dismissed them."

"Have you my key?"

"No, monsieur. When your father went away, at eight o'clock this morning, he told me that he should leave in your apartment one of his best friends, whom I was to look upon as the master until your return. You know him of course; he's a stout man of about your height, with red whiskers."

Prosper was as surprised as possible. A friend of his father in his rooms!—what did that mean? However, he did not allow his surprise to appear.

"Yes, I know," he replied, "I know."

And he hurried up the stairs and rang at his own door.

His father's friend admitted him. He was, as the concierge had described him, quite stout, red-faced, with full lips, an extraordinarily bright eye, a good-humored expression and of generally commonplace aspect. The cashier had never seen him.

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, monsieur," he said.

The stranger was entirely at home in Prosper's apartment; on the table in the salon was a book he had taken from the library; a little more and he would have done the honors of the apartment.

"I must confess, monsieur—" the cashier began.

"That you are surprised to see me here, you would say? I can understand that. Your father intended to introduce me to you, but he was obliged to return to Beaucaire this morning. I may add that he left

Paris convinced, as I myself am, that you did not take a sou from M. Fauvel."

Prosper could not repress a joyful exclamation at this news of happy augury.

"At all events," continued the stout man, "this letter from your father, which he gave me to hand to you, will, I trust, answer the purpose of an introduction."

The cashier took the letter which was handed him and opened it, and, as he read, his face lighted up, the blood returned to his pallid cheeks. When he had read the letter through he offered the stout man his hand.

"My father tells me, monsieur," he said, "that you are his best friend; he urges me to have the most absolute confidence in you and to follow your advice."

"That's the idea. This morning your worthy father said to me: 'Verduret,'—that is my name—'Verduret, my son is in the mire; we must pull him out.' I replied: 'I'm your man!'—and here I am. The ice is broken, is n't it? Then let us come down to business. What do you intend to do?"

This question rekindled all the cashier's wrath, and his eyes shot fire.

"What do I intend to do?" he replied in a trembling voice; "I intend to find the villain who ruined me, hand him over to justice—in a word, revenge myself!"

"Naturally. And have you any means of arriving at that end?"

"None. And yet I shall succeed; because a man who gives his whole life to a task, who wakes every morning with the same purpose that he had the night before, is sure to succeed."

"Well said, M. Prosper; and look you, to speak

frankly, I expected to find you in this frame of mind. And to prove it let me tell you that I have reflected and sought for you. I have a plan. To begin with, you must sell this furniture, leave this house, and disappear."

"Disappear!" cried the cashier, indignant at the thought; "disappear! Can you think of such a thing, monsieur? Why, it would be equivalent to admitting my guilt; it would justify the world in saying that I am keeping out of sight to enjoy the 350,000 francs I stole!"

"Even so! what then?" said the red-whiskered man, coolly; "did n't you just tell me that your life is already sacrificed? The skilful swimmer, when assassins throw him into the water, takes good care not to return to the surface at once; he dives, on the contrary, swims under water as long as he can manage his respiration, reappears as far away as possible, goes ashore out of sight; and it is when he is supposed to be lost, drowned, that he suddenly appears and has his revenge. You have an enemy? Only an act of imprudence on his part can put him in your power. But, as long as he sees you ready to strike, he will be on his guard."

Prosper listened with a sort of dazed submission to this man, who, albeit a friend of his father, was a stranger to him. Without being conscious of it, he submitted to the ascendancy of a nature stronger than his own. He was in need of everything and was happy to find something to lean upon.

"I will follow your advice," said Prosper, after a few moments of reflection.

"I was sure of it, my dear friend. In that case we will break up housekeeping to-day. And observe that the avails of the sale will be devilish useful to

us. Have you any money? No. But you must have some. I was so sure of persuading you that I have had a furniture dealer here; he will give 12,000 francs for everything in a lump, except the pictures."

In spite of himself the cashier made a movement, which M. Verduret noticed.

"Yes, it's hard, I know," he said, "but it is necessary. Listen," he added, in a tone in marked contrast to that he had previously adopted: "You are the sick man and I the doctor employed to cure you. If I cut into the quick, pray, if you will, but let me go on. That is your only salvation."

"Cut, monsieur," replied Prosper, falling more and more under his influence.

"Good. And — let us go on, for time presses, — You are a friend of M. Raoul de Lagors?"

"Raoul? yes, monsieur, an intimate friend."

"In that case tell me who the fellow is."

The term "fellow" seemed to offend Prosper.

"M. de Lagors, monsieur," he replied sharply, "is M. Fauvel's nephew; he is a very young man, rich, distingué, clever, and the best and truest friend I know."

"Hum!" rejoined M. Verduret, "here seems to be a mortal embellished with a multitude of good qualities, and I am delighted at the idea that I am going to make his acquaintance. For I must tell you that I have written him a little note in your name, asking him to come here, and he has answered that he would come."

"What!" cried Prosper, amazed beyond measure, "you really imagine —"

"Oh! I imagine nothing. Only, I must see this young man. Indeed, I have in my head and am

about to submit to you a little plan for your conversation with him."

A ring at the bell cut M. Verduret short.

"*Sacrebleu!* here he is," he said; "good-bye to my plan. Where can I hide so that I can see and hear?"

"In my bedroom, by leaving the door open and the portière down."

A second peal of the bell.

"Coming! coming!" cried the cashier.

"On your life, Prosper," said M. Verduret, in a tone calculated to force conviction into the most rebellious mind, "on your life, not a word to this man of your plans or of me. Be, for his benefit, discouraged, weak, hesitating —"

And he disappeared as Prosper hastened to open the door to Raoul.

The portrait of M. de Lagors drawn by his friend was none too flattering. Never was a nobler countenance in the service of a noble nature. At twenty-four years, which Raoul stated to be his age, he appeared barely twenty. He was of medium height and admirably proportioned. A profusion of light chestnut hair curled naturally about his intelligent brow. Sincerity and pride shone in his great blue eyes.

His first movement was to throw his arms around the cashier's neck.

"Poor dear fellow," he said, pressing his hands warmly, "Poor dear Prosper!"

And yet, beneath these affectionate demonstrations could be detected a certain constraint, which, if it escaped the cashier, must have been evident to M. Verduret.

When they were seated in the salon, —

"Your letter, my friend," said Raoul, "pained me terribly. I was horrified; I said to myself: 'Is he going mad?' Thereupon I dropped everything and hurried to you."

Prosper seemed hardly to hear him, so engrossed was he by this letter which he had not written. What had he been made to say? Who in Heaven's name was this man whose assistance he had accepted?

"Do you lack courage?" continued M. de Lagors. "Why despair? At our age there is still time enough to begin life over again. You have friends and true friends. My reason for coming was that I might say to you: 'Rely upon me. I am rich. half of my fortune is at your disposal.'"

This generous offer, made at that moment and with the noblest simplicity of manner, touched Prosper deeply.

"Thanks, Raoul," he replied in a voice trembling with emotion; "thanks! Unfortunately, all the money on earth would be of no use to me at this moment."

"How so? What are your plans? Can it be that you propose to remain in Paris?"

"I don't know, my friend, I have no plans; my head is in a whirl."

"I told you," said Raoul, "you must begin your life anew. Excuse my plain-speaking,—it is the plain-speaking of friendship; so long as this mysterious theft is not explained, to remain in Paris is impossible."

"And suppose it should never be explained?"

"An additional reason for making people forget you. I was talking with Clameran about you an hour ago; you are unjust to him, for he is fond of you. 'If I were in Prosper's place,' he said, 'I

would turn everything into money and sail for America, make my fortune there, and return and crush with my millions those who suspected me.'"

This advice offended Prosper's pride. Yet he made no objection. The words of the stranger who was listening to them recurred to his memory.

"Well!" said Raoul.

"I will reflect," muttered the cashier, "I will see—I would like to know what M. Fauvel thinks."

"My uncle!—you know that since I declined his proposition to take me into his office, we have been almost at swords' points. It's at least a month since I set foot in his house; but I hear of him."

"Through whom?"

"Through your protégé, young Cavaillon. My uncle, since the robbery, is in greater dismay than you, apparently. He is hardly ever seen in the office, and one would think he was just getting up from some terrible illness."

"And Madame Fauvel, and"—the cashier hesitated—"and Mademoiselle Madeleine?"

"Oh!" said Raoul, lightly, "my aunt is as pious as ever; she has masses said for the salvation of the culprit. As for my fair and frigid cousin, she is above descending to the vulgar affairs of life, so absorbed is she by the preparations for the fancy-dress ball that MM. Jandidier give day after to-morrow. She has unearthed, so one of her friends tells me, a dressmaker of talent, hitherto unknown, who is making for her a costume of a maid of honor to Catherine de' Medici, which is a marvel of beauty."

It is an acknowledged fact that the very excess of suffering, by benumbing the mind, causes a sort of insensibility. Prosper had suffered terribly, but this last blow crushed him.

"Madeleine!" he muttered; "Madeleine!"

M. de Lagors did not feel called upon to notice the exclamation; he had risen.

"I must leave you, my dear Prosper," he said; "I shall see the ladies at the ball Saturday, and I will tell you how they are. Until then, courage! and remember that, whatever happens, you can count on me."

He pressed Prosper's hands once more before taking his leave. Even after he had reached the street the cashier still stood where he had left him, motionless, utterly prostrated.

To rouse him from his gloomy meditations nothing less was necessary than the mocking voice of the man with red whiskers, who had taken his stand in front of him.

"There's a friend for you!" said M. Verduret.

"Yes!" replied Prosper, bitterly. "And yet, you heard him, he offered me half of his fortune."

M. Verduret shrugged his shoulders with an air of compassion.

"That was a paltry offer on his part," he said. "While he was about it, why did n't he say his whole fortune? Such offers are n't binding. However, I am persuaded that that dapper youth would give ten pretty notes of a thousand francs to know that the ocean was between you and him."

"He, monsieur! — why so?"

"Who knows? perhaps for the same reason that impelled him to impress upon you the fact that he had not set foot in his uncle's house for a month."

"But that is the truth, monsieur; I am sure of it."

"Naturally," said M. Verduret, with a bantering air. "But enough about this young dandy," he continued seriously; "I have his measure and

that is all I wanted. Now, if you please, you will go and change your clothes, and we will call upon M. Fauvel."

This proposition seemed extremely distasteful to Prosper.

"Never!" he cried with extraordinary vehemence. "No! I will never subject myself to the necessity of looking at that villain!"

This resistance did not surprise M. Verduret.

"I understand you," he said, "and I can appreciate your feeling, but I hope you will think better of this first impulse. Just as I desired to see M. de Lagors, I desire to see M. Fauvel; I must do it, do you understand? Are you so weak that you can't restrain yourself for five minutes? I shall introduce myself as a relation of yours and you will not have to say a word."

"If I absolutely must," said Prosper, "if you insist upon it."

"Yes, I do insist upon it. Come, come, a little assurance, deuce take it! a little confidence. Go quickly and make a bit of a toilet. I am hungry; we will breakfast on the way and talk at the same time."

The cashier had hardly gone into his bedroom when the bell rang again. M. Verduret opened the door; it was the concierge, with a package of considerable thickness in his hand.

"Here's a letter that was brought here this morning for M. Bertomy," he said. "I was so dumfounded when I saw him that I did n't think of handing it to him. It's a queer kind of a letter, though, is n't it, monsieur?"

A queer letter, indeed! The address was not written; the words which composed it were made with

printed letters, carefully cut from a book or newspaper and pasted on the envelope.

"Oho!" said M. Verduret, "what does this mean? Sit down a moment, my good man," he said to the concierge; "I will come back."

He left him in the dining-room and went into the salon, taking pains to close the door. Prosper was there; he had heard the bell, then the sound of voices, and had come to find out what was going on.

"See what some one has brought for you," said M. Verduret.

And he broke the seal without ceremony. Within were a number of bank-notes; he counted them; there were ten.

Prosper had become purple.

"What is the meaning of this?" he said.

"We are going to find out," replied M. Verduret; "here is a line pinned to the package."

The note, like the superscription, was made of printed letters and words, cut out and pasted on the paper.

It was short but explicit:—

MY DEAR PROSPER,— A friend, who realizes the horror of your situation, sends you this succor. Be sure that there is one heart which has shared all your agony. Go away, leave France; you are young and the future is yours. Go, and may this money bring you good fortune!

As the red-whiskered man read these words, aloud, Prosper's wrath waxed fiercer and fiercer. Frantic wrath, for he was unable to explain the events which succeeded one another so rapidly, and he felt as if his mind were giving way.

"So everybody insists upon my going away," he cried; "in God's name, is it a conspiracy?"

M. Verduret dissembled a smile of satisfaction.

"At last," he said, "you are opening your eyes; you are beginning to understand. Yes, my boy, there are people who hate you for all the injury they have done you; yes, there are people to whom your presence in Paris would be a constant threat, and who are determined to drive you away at any price."

"But who are these people, monsieur? Tell me; tell me who dares to send me this money."

The friend of M. Bertomy the elder shook his head sadly.

"If I knew, my dear Prosper," he replied, "my task would be accomplished, for then I should know who committed the theft of which you were accused. But we will see what we can find out. I have at last one of those clues which sooner or later become overwhelming evidence. I had nothing but more or less probable deductions; now I have a fact which proves to me that I was not mistaken. I was walking in the dark; now I have a light to guide me."

M. Verduret, that man of commonplace aspect, with the ready chatter of the commercial traveller, could command, when it pleased him, the imperious tones which impose respect upon feeble souls and diseased minds.

Prosper recovered something of his assurance as he listened, and felt that hope was born again within him.

"The essential thing now," continued M. Verduret, "is to make the most of this clew which the imprudence of your enemies has placed in our hands. Let us begin by questioning the concierge."

He opened the door and called: —

"I say, my good man! come this way, please."

The concierge, a man of most excellent manners,

complied, twisting his cap and greatly puzzled by the authoritative air assumed by this stranger on his tenant's premises.

"Who handed you the package you just brought up?" queried M. Verduret.

"A messenger, who told me that he had been paid."

"Do you know him?"

"I know no one better; he's the man who has his stool at the wine-shop on the corner of Rue Pigalle."

"Go and bring him here."

As the concierge left the room on the run, M. Verduret took his memorandum book from his pocket and consulted alternately the bank-notes spread out on the table and a page all covered with figures.

"These notes," he said in a tone of decision, after his examination was concluded, "are not sent by the thief."

"You think not, monsieur?"

"I am quite sure of it; unless, at least, this same thief is endowed with extraordinary shrewdness and forethought; for there is one thing certain, absolutely certain, and that is that none of these thousand-franc notes were among the three hundred and fifty stolen from your safe."

"But," suggested Prosper, unable to explain his protector's certainty, "but —"

"There is no but; I have the numbers of all the notes —"

"What! when even I myself did not have them?"

"The Bank had them, my young friend, and it's very lucky that they did. When one takes hold of a case, he must anticipate everything, forget nothing. It's no excuse for a man of ordinary sense to say,

when he has fallen into some stupid error, 'Why, I did n't think of that!' — I thought of the Bank."

If Prosper had felt at first any repugnance about placing himself absolutely in the hands of his father's friend, that repugnance was gradually disappearing. He realized that he alone, hardly master of himself and dependent upon the inspirations of his inexperience, would never have exhibited the patient perspicacity of this strange personage.

He meanwhile continued, talking to himself, as if he had entirely forgotten Prosper's presence: —

"Therefore, as the package does n't come from the thief, it clearly can come only from the other person who was near the safe when the crime was committed, who was unable to prevent it, and who is now suffering from remorse. The probability that two persons were cognizant of the theft, a probability suggested by the scratch, now becomes an indisputable certainty. *Ergo*, I was right."

The cashier listened with all his ears, exerting his imagination to make something of this monologue, which he dared not interrupt.

"Let us think," continued the stout man, "let us think who this second person can be, whose conscience is uneasy and who nevertheless has not dared to reveal anything."

He took the letter and read it very slowly three or four times, weighing each sentence, dwelling upon each word.

"Clearly," he muttered, "very clearly this letter was composed by a woman. No man, seeking to do another man a service by sending him money, would ever use the word *succor*, an insulting word if there is such a thing; *loan*, *advance*, *funds*, or some other equivalent word, but never *succor*. Only a woman,

who knows nothing of the absurd sensitiveness of the other sex, would have deemed the idea represented by that word a perfectly natural one. As for the sentence, 'There is one heart,' etc., that can have been imagined only by a woman."

This time Prosper had been able to follow his protector's inductive reasoning.

"You are mistaken, I think, monsieur," he said; "no woman can be mixed up in this affair."

M. Verduret did not notice the interruption. Perhaps he did not hear it; perhaps it did not suit him to discuss his opinions.

"Let us try now," he continued, "to discover where the words that make up these three sentences were cut from."

He walked to the window and began to study the characters pasted on the paper, with the scrupulous care of a scholar in *us* trying to decipher a venerable, half-illegible manuscript.

"Small letters," he said, "very fine, very clear, printed very carefully, paper quite thin and highly polished! Consequently they were not cut from a newspaper, nor from a novel, nor from any book intended for general sale. And yet I have seen this type before, I know it. Didot often uses the same thing, and so does Mame, of Tours."

He paused, his mouth half open, his eyes dilated, making one of those vigorous appeals to the memory which concentrate the whole mind upon a single point.

Suddenly he struck his brow.

"I know," he said, "I know! How in the devil did I fail to see it at the first glance? All these words were cut from a prayer-book. However, we will see; there is one method of verification."

Thereupon he moistened gently with the tip of his tongue some of the words pasted on the paper, and when he saw that the paste was sufficiently wet, he succeeded in removing them with the aid of a pin. On the back of one of them a Latin word was printed : *Deus*.

"Aha!" he exclaimed with a laugh of satisfaction, "I guessed right. Papa Tabaret would be satisfied if he were here. But what has become of the mutilated prayer-book? Has it been burned? No, for a bound book does n't burn easily. It has probably been tossed into some corner."

M. Verduret suddenly broke off; the concierge returned, bringing with him the messenger from the corner of Rue Pigalle.

"Ah! you come just in time, my boy," said the stout man, in his most affable manner.

He handed the messenger the cover of the package.

"Do you remember bringing this here this morning?" he inquired.

"Perfectly, monsieur, especially as I noticed the address; you don't see many like it, do you?"

"I agree with you. Who gave it to you to bring here? Was it a man, or a woman?"

"No, monsieur, a messenger."

This reply, which greatly amused the concierge, did not even make M. Verduret smile.

"A messenger," he continued; "do you know this colleague of yours?"

"I never so much as saw him before."

"What sort of a man was he?"

"Faith, monsieur, neither tall nor short; he was dressed in a jacket of greenish velvet, and wore his medal."

"The deuce! that's rather a vague description, my

boy, and will apply to many messengers; but perhaps this colleague of yours told you who employed him to do this errand?"

"No, monsieur. He simply said to me, putting ten sous in my hand: 'Here, take this to 39 Rue Chaptal; a cabman just gave it to me on the boulevard.' Ten sous! I am sure he made more than I did."

This reply seemed to disconcert M. Verduret somewhat. So many precautions taken to send this letter to Prosper disturbed him and disarranged his plans.

"Tell me," he said at last, "would you recognize this other messenger?"

"Why, yes, monsieur, if I should see him."

"Listen to me, then. How much does your business bring you in per day?"

"*Dame!* monsieur, I can't exactly say, but I have a good corner, you know! Let's say eight to ten francs a day."

"Very good. Now, my boy, I'll give you ten francs a day just to walk about and look for the messenger who gave you this parcel. Every night about eight o'clock, come to the Hôtel du Grand-Archange on Quai Saint-Michel and give me an account of your day's work and get your pay. Ask for M. Verduret. If you find our man I will give you fifty francs. Does the bargain suit you?"

"*Peste!* I should say so, bourgeois."

"Don't waste a moment, then; off with you!"

Although unaware of M. Verduret's plan, Prosper began to understand the significance of his investigations. His life depended on their success, so to speak, and yet he almost forgot it, to admire the activity of this strange coadjutor whom his father had bequeathed to him, his bantering *sang-froid*, the un-

erring accuracy of his deductions, the fertility of his expedients, the rapidity of his movements.

"And so, monsieur," he asked, when the messenger had gone, "you still think you can detect a woman's hand in all that has happened to me?"

"More than ever, and what is more a pious woman's, a woman's who at all events owned two prayer-books, since she mutilated one of them to write to you."

"And you have some hope of finding her?"

"Say a very great hope, my dear Prosper, thanks to the means at my disposal of immediate investigation, means which I propose to utilize instantly."

He sat down as he finished speaking and rapidly scribbled two or three lines in pencil on a little slip of paper, which he rolled up and slipped in his waistcoat pocket.

"Are you ready for our visit to M. Fauvel? Yes? Then let us go; we have well earned our breakfast."

VIII

WHEN he had spoken of M. André Fauvel's extraordinary prostration, Raoul de Lagors had not exaggerated in the least. Since the ill-omened day when his cashier had been arrested on his complaint, the banker, a man naturally active to the point of turbulence, had fallen a victim to the blackest depression, and had absolutely ceased to attend to his business.

He, the family man *par excellence*, no longer appeared among his family except at meal hours, when he hastily swallowed a few mouthfuls and instantly

disappeared. He shut himself up in his private office, giving orders to admit nobody. His contracted features, his heedlessness of everything, his constant absent-mindedness, betrayed the preoccupation of a fixed idea or the tyrannical domination of some secret grief.

On the day of Prosper's release from custody, about three o'clock, M. Fauvel was seated at his desk as usual, his elbows resting upon it, his head in his hands, his eyes lost in space, when his office boy hastily entered with an air of dismay.

"Monsieur," he said, "the former cashier, M. Bertomy, is outside with one of his relations; he absolutely insists upon seeing you and speaking to you."

At these words the banker sprang to his feet, more startled than if he had seen the lightning strike three feet away.

"Prosper," he cried in a voice choked by anger, "what! he dares!"

But he realized that he must not give way to his natural impetuosity before his office-boy, so he succeeded in resuming his self-possession and added in a voice that was comparatively calm: —

"Show the gentlemen in."

If M. Verduret, the stout man with the jovial manner, had anticipated a curious and moving spectacle his expectation was not disappointed.

Nothing more terrible can be imagined than the attitude of those two men when brought face to face: the banker with his face flushed and swollen as if he were on the verge of an apoplectic attack; Prosper more livid than the wounded man who has lost his last drop of blood. They stood motionless, quivering, barely three paces apart, exchanging glances laden

with deadly hatred, ready to hurl themselves upon each other.

During a full minute at least, M. Verduret curiously scrutinized these two enemies, with the cool indifference of a philosopher who sees in the most violent transports of human passion nothing more than a subject of study and meditation.

At last, as the silence became more and more threatening, he decided to break it, and he said to the banker: —

“Doubtless you knew, monsieur, that my young kinsman had been discharged?”

“Yes,” replied M. Fauvel, making a praiseworthy effort to restrain his wrath; “yes, for lack of sufficient evidence.”

“Precisely, monsieur; now, that phrase ‘lack of evidence,’ in the order of discharge, so completely ruins my kinsman’s future that he has decided to sail for America.”

At this announcement, M. Fauvel’s expression changed abruptly. His features relaxed as if he were relieved of some horrible torture.

“Ah! he is going away,” he repeated several times, “he is going away.”

There was no misunderstanding his meaning. The words, “He is going away,” uttered in that tone, were a deadly insult.

M. Verduret declined to notice them.

“It seems to me,” he replied lightly, “that my kinsman’s decision is judicious. I simply desired that, before leaving Paris, he should come and present his respects to his former employer.

The banker’s lips curled in a bitter smile.

“M. Bertomy,” he rejoined, “might have spared himself this step, painful as it is to both of us. I

desire to hear nothing from him; I have nothing to say to him."

This was a formal dismissal, and M. Verduret, so understanding it, bowed to M. Fauvel and went out, dragging Prosper, who had not uttered a syllable.

Not until they were in the street did the cashier recover the faculty of speech.

"You insisted upon it, monsieur," he said in a hollow voice; "you exacted it and I accompanied you. Are you content? Am I the better off for having this ghastly humiliation to add to all the rest?"

"You, no," replied M. Verduret, "but I am. I could not get at the banker without you, and now I know what I wanted to know: I am absolutely certain that M. André Fauvel had nothing to do with the theft."

"Oh! monsieur," objected Prosper, "a man can pretend."

"Undoubtedly, but not to that point. And that is not all: I required, in the interest of my ulterior plan, to find out whether your employer would be accessible to certain suspicions. Now I can answer boldly: Yes."

Prosper and his companion, in order to talk more freely, had stopped on the corner of Rue Laffitte, in the centre of a large lot of land left unoccupied by recent demolitions.

M. Verduret seemed restless, and while he was speaking kept turning his head as if he were expecting some one. Ere long he uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. At the farther end of this improvised square Cavaillon appeared, bare-headed and running toward them.

He was so hurried and so alarmed at the same

time, that he did not think of congratulating his dear friend Prosper or even of pressing his hand. He addressed M. Verduret directly.

"They have gone," he said.

"How long since?"

"Barely a quarter of an hour."

"The deuce!" said M. Verduret; "that being so, we have n't a moment to lose."

And handing Cavaillon the note he had written in Prosper's room some hours before, he said: —

"Here, give her this and return at once, so that your absence may not be noticed; to go out without a hat is an imprudence that may give the alarm."

Little Cavaillon did not wait to be told twice, but started off again on the run, as he had come. Prosper was stupefied.

"What!" he said, "you know Cavaillon?"

"So it seems," M. Verduret replied with a smile.

"But this is no time for talking; come, let us make haste!"

"Where are we going now?"

"You shall know in time; Come, legs, legs!"

He himself set the example and hurried along Rue Lafayette almost at a sprinter's pace. As he walked, as he ran rather, he talked, apparently caring little whether Prosper did or did not hear him.

"Ah!" he said, "it's not by keeping both feet in the same shoe, you see, that one wins prizes in the race-course. When a scent is found you should n't take a moment's rest. The savage who comes on an enemy's footprint in his virgin forests follows it without relaxation, knowing that a breath of wind or a drop of rain is enough to efface it. So with us; the slightest accident may efface the tracks we are following."

Having arrived in front of number 81, M. Verduret stopped talking and running at the same moment.

"This is the place," he said to Prosper; "let us go in."

They went upstairs and stopped on the second floor before a door embellished with a copper-plate on which were the words: *Modes et Confections*. A superb bell-rope hung beside the door frame, but M. Verduret did not touch it. He tapped very gently and in a peculiar way with the end of his finger, and the door instantly opened, as if some one were awaiting that signal.

It was a woman who opened the door. She seemed to be about forty years old; she was simply but very tastefully dressed. Without a sound she ushered Prosper and his companion into a scrupulously neat dining-room into which several doors opened.

She had bowed very low before M. Verduret, as a protégée might before her protector. He barely acknowledged the salutation. He questioned the woman with his eyes. His glance said:—

"Well?"

The woman bent her head affirmatively.

"Yes."

"In there, are n't they!" said M. Verduret, in a low voice, pointing to one of the doors.

"No," the woman replied in the same tone, "on the other side, in the small salon."

M. Verduret instantly opened the door pointed out to him, and gently pushed Prosper into the small salon, whispering in his ear:—

"Go in — and be cool."

But of what avail are such injunctions? At the first glance he cast into that room, into which he was forced in spite of himself, without warning of

what he was to expect, Prosper uttered a loud cry: —

“Madeleine!”

It was in very truth M. Fauvel's niece, lovelier than ever, with that calm and serene loveliness which impels admiration and commands respect. Standing in the centre of the salon, by a table covered with materials, she was arranging the fold of a red velvet skirt with gold stripes, doubtless the skirt of her costume as a maid of honor to Catherine de' Medici.

At sight of Prosper all her blood rushed to her face, her lovely eyes half closed, as if she were on the point of fainting, and her strength failed her so completely that she was obliged to lean against the table to avoid falling.

Madeleine was not — and Prosper was well aware of the fact — one of those strong-minded women whose frozen hearts leave their minds always free, who have sensations but never a genuine sentiment, heroines of novels who find an expedient in all emergencies. An affectionate, dreamy soul, she owed to the peculiar circumstances of her life an exquisite, almost unhealthy sensitiveness. But she was proud, she was incapable of compounding with her conscience. When duty had spoken, she obeyed.

Her weakness lasted only a moment, and soon her tender eyes expressed no other sentiments than pride and resentment. In an offended tone, she said: —

“What has made you so bold, monsieur, as to dare to spy upon my acts? How could you presume to follow me, to force your way into this house?”

Prosper certainly was not blameworthy. He would have liked to explain in a word all that had happened. But his utter inability to express his thoughts compelled him to be silent.

"You promised me solemnly, on your honor," continued Madeleine, "never to try to see me again. Is this the way you keep your promise?"

"I did promise, mademoiselle, but —"

He paused.

"Oh! go on."

"So many things have happened since that day that I might well have thought that that promise, extorted from my weakness, was forgotten, were it only for an hour. To chance, at all events to a will other than my own, I owe the happiness of being once more in your presence. Alas! when I saw you my heart instinctively leaped for joy. I did not think, no, I could not think, that you would be as pitiless, yes, more pitiless than the world, and spurn me when I am so miserable!"

If Prosper had been less violently agitated he might have followed in Madeleine's eyes, those lovely eyes which had so long controlled his destiny, the progress of the internal combat that was waging in her heart.

And yet her voice was quite firm as she replied: —

"You know me well enough, Prosper, to know that any blow that is dealt you must necessarily reach me. You suffer; I pity you as a sister pities a beloved brother."

"A sister!" said Prosper, bitterly; "yes, that was the word you used on the day you banished me from your presence. A sister! In that case, why did you nourish me with the most deceptive illusions for three whole years? Was I a brother to you on the day that we made the pilgrimage to Notre-Dame-de-Fourvières, and, after we had vowed at the foot of the altar to love each other forever, you hung a consecrated relic around my neck, saying: 'Keep

this always for love of me; it will bring you good luck'?"

Madeleine tried to interrupt him with a gentle, imploring gesture. He did not see it.

"That was a year ago," he continued; "and less than a month afterward you gave me back my word and extorted from me the promise never to see you again. If I only knew what act, what thought of mine can have displeased you! But you condescended to give me no explanation. You dismissed me, and, to obey you entirely, I allowed it to be thought that I voluntarily left you. You told me that an insurmountable obstacle had arisen between us, and I believed you. Fool that I was! The obstacle is your heart, Madeleine. Still, I have always piously preserved the consecrated relic. It has not brought me good luck."

More motionless and whiter than a statue, Madeleine bent her head beneath this outburst of an immense passion. Great tears rolled silently down her cheeks.

"I told you to forget," she said.

"Forget!" echoed Prosper, as horrified as if she had uttered a blasphemy, "forget! Why, can I? Is it in my power to arrest the circulation of my blood by the mere exertion of my will? Ah! you never loved me! To forget, as to stop the beating of one's heart, there is but one way — to die!"

These words, uttered in a tone of fierce determination, overwhelmed Madeleine.

"Unhappy man!" she cried.

"Ay, unhappy indeed! A thousand times unhappier than you can imagine! You will never understand my torture during this last year, when I have had to learn my misery over again every morning,

so to speak, and to say to myself: 'It is all over, she no longer loves me!' What do you mean by forgetting? I have tried to find oblivion at the bottom of poisoned cups, but I have failed. I have tried to extinguish the memory of the past which burned within me with a consuming flame; in vain. When the body succumbed, the implacable mind was still on the alert. You can see that I must inevitably have thought of repose, that is to say, of suicide."

"I forbid you to say that word."

"You have no right to forbid one whom you no longer love, Madeleine; don't you know that?"

Madeleine interrupted him with an imperious gesture, as if she would have spoken, and, who knows, explained everything, exculpated herself. But a sudden reflection checked her; she threw up her hands in desperation and cried:—

"*Mon Dieu!* this is too hard to bear!"

Prosper seemed to misunderstand the meaning of this exclamation.

"Your pity comes too late," he rejoined with heart-rending resignation. "There is no possible happiness for the man who, like me, has caught a glimpse of divine bliss. There is nothing to bind me to life. You have killed the most sacred faith in my heart; I have come out of prison dishonored by my enemies. What is to become of me? In vain do I question the future; for me there is no longer hope, nor smiles, nor promises. I look about me and I see nothing but desertion, solitude, and despair."

"Prosper, my friend, my brother, if you only knew —"

"I know but one thing, Madeleine, and that is that you did love me once, that you have ceased to love me, and that I love you!"

He paused. He hoped for a reply. It was not forthcoming. But suddenly the silence was disturbed by a stifled sob. It was Madeleine's maid, who sat by the fireplace in the salon, weeping. Madeleine had forgotten her; Prosper, dazed, stupefied as he was on entering the room, had not noticed her.

He glanced at her. It was impossible to mistake; that young woman, dressed like a lady's-maid in a well-to-do family, was Nina Gypsy.

Violent as was the shock to Prosper's composure, he made no exclamation, did not utter a word. The horror of the situation appalled him. There he stood, between the two women who had exerted a controlling influence over his life, — Madeleine, the haughty heiress whom he adored and who spurned him, and Nina Gypsy, the poor girl who loved him and whom he scorned. And the ill-starred Gypsy had overheard it all; she had seen her lover's passion for another overflow in heart-rending regrets and insane threats.

By what he suffered, Prosper could understand what she must have suffered. For she was stricken not only in the present, but in the past. How humiliated, how indignant she must be to learn of the vile rôle which Prosper's love had forced upon her! And he was amazed that Gypsy, who was the personification of violence, should sit there weeping, and not rise to protest, to curse him.

Madeleine, meanwhile, during Prosper's silence, had succeeded, by exerting all her strength, in recovering an appearance of tranquillity. Slowly, with movements of which she seemed hardly conscious, she had put on her cloak, which lay on a couch. When she was ready to go she walked up to Prosper.

"Why did you come?" she said. "You and I both have need of all our courage. You are unhappy,

Prosper, but I am unhappier than you. You have a right to complain; but I have no right to allow a tear to be seen, and when my heart is torn I must still smile. You can seek consolation from a friend, but I can have no other confidant than God."

Prosper tried to stammer a reply; the words died on his lips; he was suffocated by his emotion.

"I cannot help saying to you," continued Madeleine, "that I have forgotten nothing. Oh! do not let the certainty of that revive your hopes; there is no future for us. If you love me, you will live. You will not have the barbarity to add to my present tortures the sorrow of your death. Perhaps the day will come when I shall be allowed to set myself right. And now, my brother, my only friend, adieu! adieu!"

She leaned toward Prosper as she spoke, touched the unhappy young man's brow with her lips, and rushed from the room followed by Nina Gypsy.

Prosper was alone; it seemed to him as if he were waking from a dream.

Thereupon he strove to explain to himself what had just taken place, asking himself if he had not been made the plaything of a vision, if his reason were not wavering. He could not fail to recognize the powerful influence of the man whom he had seen for the first time in his life that very morning. What mysterious power had this stranger at his command that he could thus dispose events as he chose? He seemed to foresee everything and to divine everything; he knew Cavaillon, he knew what Madeleine was doing, he had been able to force the self-willed Gypsy to obey him.

He rapidly worked himself up to such a pitch of exasperation that when M. Verduret entered the small salon he charged upon him like a madman,

pale and threatening, and demanded in a sharp, stern voice:—

“Who are you?”

The stout man seemed but very little surprised at this outbreak of violence.

“A friend of your father’s,” he said; “don’t you know?”

“That is no answer, monsieur. I was foolish enough to resign my will into the hands of a stranger, taken by surprise as I was; but now—”

“What do I understand? Do you want my biography,—what I am, what I have been, what I may be? What do you care? I have said to you, ‘I will save you!’ the important point, so far as you are concerned, is that I should save you.”

“Still, I have the right to ask you by what means.”

“What is the use?”

“In order to accept your means, monsieur, or to reject them.”

“And suppose I assure you that they will be successful?”

“That is not enough, monsieur, and I cannot submit to be longer deprived of my free will, to be exposed, without warning, to such tests as those of to-day. A man of my age should know what he is doing.”

“A man of your age, Prosper, when he is blind, takes a guide, and he is careful not to presume to point out the road to the man who is guiding him.”

M. Verduret’s tone, half raillery, half compassion, was not calculated to allay Prosper’s increasing irritation.

“Since that is the case,” he cried, “thanks for your services, monsieur; I have no further use for

them. If I consented to fight to defend my honor and my life, it was because I hoped that, sooner or later, Madeleine would return to me. I know now that all is at an end between us; I withdraw from the contest."

So unmistakable was Prosper's determination that for an instant M. Verduret seemed alarmed.

"You are going mad!" he exclaimed.

"No, unfortunately. Madeleine no longer loves me; what do I care for the rest?"

His tone was so desperate that M. Verduret was touched.

"What! do you suspect nothing?" he rejoined. "Could n't you detect the real meaning of her words?"

Prosper made a threatening gesture.

"You were listening!" he cried.

"I admit it."

"Monsieur!"

"True, it was not a very delicate thing to do, perhaps; but the end justifies the means. I listened and I congratulate myself that I did, since I am able to say to you now: 'Pluck up your courage, Prosper; Mademoiselle Madeleine loves you, she has never ceased to love you.'"

Even when he knows, when he feels that he is lost, that he is at death's door, the sick man lends an eager ear to the doctor's promises. M. Verduret's concise assertion lightened Prosper's misery with a gleam of hope.

"Oh!" he murmured, suddenly tranquillized, "oh! if I could believe —"

"Believe me, for I cannot be mistaken. Ah! you did not divine as I did that noble-hearted girl's suffering as she struggled between her love and what

she conceives to be her duty. Did n't your heart beat fast at her parting words?"

"She loves me, she is free, and she turns away from me—"

"Free! No, she is not. In giving you back your promise she obeyed a superior, irresistible will. She sacrificed herself. For whom? We shall soon know. and the secret of her sacrifice will lead us to the secret of the plot of which you are a victim."

As M. Verduret spoke, Prosper was conscious that his determination to rebel was melting away, and that his hope and courage were returning.

"If only you were right!" he murmured; "if only you were right!"

"Unhappy boy! why do you persist in closing your eyes to the evidence? Can't you understand that Madeleine knows the name of the thief?"

"Impossible!"

"It is a fact. But, mark my words, there is no human power capable of tearing that name from her. True, she sacrifices you, but she almost has the right to do it, since she sacrificed herself first."

Prosper was conquered; but he could not, without a breaking heart, leave that salon where Madeleine had appeared to him.

"Alas!" he cried, pressing M. Verduret's hand, "I must seem to you an insane, absurd creature. But you do not know, you cannot know what I suffer."

The red-whiskered man shook his head sadly; in an instant his expression changed, his eyes grew dim, his voice trembled.

"What you suffer," he rejoined, "I have suffered. Like you I loved, not a pure and noble girl, but a prostitute. For three years I was at her feet. Then she left me abruptly one day, though I adored her,

to throw herself into the arms of a man who despised her. Then, like you, I longed to die. Wretched creature! neither tears nor prayers would bring her back to me. Passion does n't reason, and she loved the other man."

"And did you know this other man?"

"I knew him."

"And you did not revenge yourself?"

"No," M. Verduret replied; and added in a tone of singular meaning: "Chance has taken my revenge in hand."

For a long minute Prosper did not speak.

"I have decided, monsieur," he said at last; "my honor is a sacred trust for which I am bound to account to my family; I am ready to follow you to the end; do with me as you will."

That very day, Prosper, true to his promise, sold his furniture and wrote letters to his friends announcing his approaching departure for San Francisco. And in the evening he took up his abode, as did M. Verduret, at the Grand-Archange.

Madame Alexandre gave him her prettiest chamber — ugly enough, to be sure, if compared with the coquettish salon on Rue Chaptal, but he was in no frame of mind to make the comparison. Stretched out on a wretched couch, he reviewed the events of the day, finding a bitter enjoyment in his solitude.

About eleven o'clock, as his head felt heavy, he opened the window; the wind, however, compelled him to close it again very quickly. But a gust had entered the room and shaken the curtains, and a small piece of paper was fluttering about the floor. Prosper instinctively picked it up and examined it. It was covered with fine handwriting, — Nina Gypsy's; there was no mistaking it.

It was a torn fragment of a letter, and although the broken sentences conveyed no satisfactory meaning to the mind, they sufficed to lead the imagination astray in the boundless field of possibilities.

Here is the fragment, word for word: —

- " . . . M. Raoul's, I was very —
- " . . . plot against him, of which —
- " . . . warn Prosper, and then —
- " . . . best friend, he —
- " . . . the hand of Mlle. Ma — "

Prosper did not sleep that night.

IX

NOT far from the Palais-Royal, on Rue Saint-Honoré, at the sign of the *Bonne Foi*, is a small establishment, half café, half grocery, much frequented by the clerks of the quarter. It was in one of the rooms of this modest establishment that Prosper, on Friday, the day following his release, sat waiting for M. Verduret, who had appointed to meet him there at four o'clock.

As the clock was striking, M. Verduret, who is punctuality itself, appeared in the doorway. He was somewhat redder than on the previous day, but had the same admirable air of perfect self-contentment. As soon as the waiter from whom he had ordered a glass of beer had retired, he said to Prosper: —

"Well! are all our errands done?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"You have seen the costumer?"

"I gave him your letter. All that you want will be brought to you to-morrow at the Grand-Archange."

"All goes well, then, for I have not wasted my time, and I bring great news."

The *Bonne Foi* is almost deserted about four o'clock. The morning rush for coffee has passed and the hour for absinthe has not arrived; thus M. Verduret and Prosper were able to talk freely, without having to fear the indiscreet ear of any neighbor.

M. Verduret had taken out his note-book, that invaluable note-book which, like the enchanted books in fairy tales, has an answer for every question.

"While we wait for those of our emissaries whom I have appointed to meet here, let us give a little time to M. de Lagors."

Prosper did not protest at the mention of that name, as he had done the day before. Like those invisible insects which, when they have once found their way into the trunk of a tree, devour it in one night, suspicion, when it has found its way into our mind, spreads out and soon destroys the stoutest faith. Lagors' visit and the fragment of Gypsy's letter had planted in Prosper's mind doubts which had increased and established themselves more firmly, so to speak, from hour to hour.

"Do you know, my dear fellow," continued M. Verduret, "from what province this young man comes who claims to be so devoted a friend of yours?"

"From the same town as Madame Fauvel, Saint-Remy."

"Are you sure of it?"

"Oh! perfectly sure, monsieur. Not only has he often told me so, but I have heard M. Fauvel say so, I have heard Madame Fauvel say so a hundred times when she was speaking of her kinswoman, Lagors' mother, of whom she is very fond."

"Then there is no possibility of doubt or mistake in that regard?"

"No, monsieur."

"Well, well," said M. Verduret, "this begins to be a little peculiar, to say the least."

And he began to whistle through his teeth, which is, with him, a well-recognized symptom of extreme secret satisfaction.

"What is it that's peculiar, monsieur?" queried Prosper, at a loss to understand.

"What I am finding out, *parbleu!*" replied the stout man; "what I had suspected. *Peste!*" he continued — imitating the manner of an exhibitor of curiosities at a country fair — "Saint-Remy is a charming town; six thousand inhabitants, delightful boulevards on the site of the fortifications, very fine hôtel de ville, abundant fountains, large trade in coal and silk products, famous insane hospital, etc."

Prosper was on coals of fire.

"In Heaven's name, monsieur —" he began.

"There is a Roman triumphal arch there," continued M. Verduret, "which has not its equal, and a Greek mausoleum, but not a sign of a Lagors. Saint-Remy is the birthplace of Nostradamus, but not of your friend."

"But, monsieur, I have had proofs —"

"Of course. But proofs are manufactured, you see; relationships are made to order. Your depositions are suspicious, my evidence is beyond question. While you were eating your heart out in prison, I was setting up my batteries and collecting ammunition preparatory to opening fire. I wrote to Saint-Remy, and I have replies."

"Will you not communicate them to me, monsieur?"

"A little patience," said M. Verduret, turning the

leaves of his note-book. "Ah! here is the first, number 1. Hats off to the style, it's official."

He read as follows: —

"LAGORS. — A very ancient family, originally of Mailane, settled in Saint-Remy a century ago —"

"You see!" cried Prosper.

"Suppose you let me finish, eh?" said M. Verduret.

And he read on: —

"The last of the LAGORS (Jules-René-Henri), bearing, without any well-established claim thereto, the title of count, married in 1829 Mademoiselle Rosalie-Clarisse Fontanet of Tarascon; he died in December, 1848, without male heir, leaving two daughters only. The civil registers I have consulted mention no person in the arrondissement bearing the name of Lagors."

"Well?" queried the stout man, "what do you say to this evidence?"

Prosper was overwhelmed.

"But how is it that M. Fauvel calls Raoul his nephew?"

"His wife's nephew, you mean. But let us examine document number 2. It is not official, but it casts a valuable light on your friend's twenty thousand francs a year.

"Jules-René-Henri Lagors, last of his name, died at Saint-Remy December 29, 1848, in a state closely resembling destitution. He had had a considerable fortune, but sank it all and ruined himself in a model silk-worm nursery.

"He left no son, but two daughters, one of whom is a governess at Aix and the other married to a small tradesman of Orgon. His widow, who occupies the farm of

Montagnette, practically lives on the liberality of a kinswoman, the wife of a wealthy banker at the capital. No man of the name of Lagors is known in the arrondissement of Arles.'

"That's all!" said M. Verduret; "do you think it's enough?"

"Indeed, monsieur, I wonder if I am really awake."

"I can understand that. However, I have one comment to make. Far-seeing persons will allege perhaps that Lagors' widow may, after her husband's death, have had a natural child, never acknowledged but bearing his name. That suggestion is met by your friend's age. Raoul is twenty-four years old, and it is less than twenty years since M. de Lagors died."

There was no answer to that, and Prosper fully realized it.

"But in that case," he said thoughtfully, "who can Raoul be?"

"I don't know. Frankly, it is much harder to find out who he is than who he is not. A single man can enlighten us on this point, but he would take good care not to say a word."

"M. de Clameran, you mean?"

"Precisely."

"He has always inspired me with an inexplicable feeling of repulsion," said Prosper. "Ah! if we could get hold of that man's record!"

"I have a few little memoranda already," rejoined M. Verduret, "furnished me by your father, who knows the Clameran family well; they are very precise, but I expect others."

"What did my father tell you?"

"Nothing favorable, never fear. However, here is a summary of his testimony, for your edification:—

"Louis de Clameran was born at the Château of Clameran, near Tarascon. He had an older brother named Gaston. In 1842, as the result of a quarrel in which he was unfortunate enough to kill one man and severely wound another, Gaston was obliged to leave the country. He was a manly, frank, honest young fellow, whom everybody loved. Louis, on the other hand, had the most detestable instincts and was hated.

"At his father's death, Louis came to Paris, and in less than two years squandered not only his own share of his father's property, but his exiled brother's share as well.

"Ruined, overwhelmed with debts, Louis de Clameran turned soldier, and behaved so badly in the regiment that he was consigned to the disciplinary companies.

"When he left the service, he vanished from sight; all that any one knows of him is that he lived in England and in Germany, where he had a horrible row at a gambling-place.

"In 1865 we find him in Paris again. He was in the utmost misery and frequented the lowest circles of society, living entirely among criminals and prostitutes.

"He had exhausted all the most disgraceful expedients when he suddenly learned of his brother's return to France. Gaston had made a fortune in Mexico. But being still young and accustomed to an active life, he had bought an iron foundry near Oleron, where he died six months ago, in the arms of his brother Louis. His death gave our Clameran a large fortune and the title of marquis as well."

Prosper was lost in thought. In the twenty-four hours that M. Verduret had been at work in his pres-

ence, he had begun to gain an insight into his method of reasoning by induction. He tried to do as he did, to arrange facts in groups and to adjust circumstances to suspicions of more or less probability.

"From what you tell me," he said at last, "it follows that M. de Clameran — our M. de Clameran, of course — was in the depths of destitution when I first saw him at M. Fauvel's."

"Evidently."

"And it was just after that that Lagors arrived from his province."

"Precisely."

"And it was about a month after his arrival that Madeleine suddenly banished me."

"Good!" cried M. Verduret; "you are beginning to take your bearings and to understand the significance of facts."

He paused at sight of a new customer who entered the *Bonne Foi* at that moment.

He was a servant in some good family, well combed, better shaved, carrying with a dignified air his black whiskers *à la* Bergami; he wore handsome boots with light tops, yellow breeches, and a red and black striped waistcoat with sleeves. After a swift but keen glance around the room he walked rapidly toward M. Verduret's table.

"Well, Master Joseph Dubois?" queried the stout man.

"Ah! patron, don't speak of it," replied the servant; "it's getting hot, you see, it's getting devilish hot."

All the attention of which Prosper was capable he concentrated upon that superb domestic. It seemed to him that he knew that face. He said to himself that he certainly had seen somewhere that retreating

brow and those irritatingly restless eyes. But where, under what circumstances? He tried to remember, but could not.

Meanwhile Master Joseph had seated himself, not at M. Verduret's table, but at the next one, and had called for a glass of absinthe, which he prepared slowly, letting the water fall, drop by drop, from a great height, according to rule.

"Speak!" said M. Verduret.

"To begin with, I must confess that all is not roses in the profession of valet-coachman to M. de Clameran."

"All right! all right! you can complain to-morrow."

"I understand. Well, yesterday my bourgeois went out on foot about two o'clock. Of course I followed him. Do you know where he went? Such a joke! He went to the Grand-Archange to keep the little woman's appointment."

"Very good; he was told that she had gone away. What next?"

"What next! Oh! he was n't at all pleased, I promise you. He returned at full speed to the hotel, where the other one, M. Raoul de Lagors, was waiting for him. No, upon my word, that man has n't his equal for swearing. Raoul asked him what there was new that made him so mad. 'Nothing,' says my bourgeois, 'nothing, except that the slut has decamped, that no one knows where she is, that she's slipped between our fingers.' With that they both seemed much annoyed and very uneasy. 'Does she know anything serious?' Lagors asked. 'She knows nothing but what I've told you,' says Clameran, 'but that nothing falling into the ear of a man with a keen scent may put him on the track of the truth.'"

M. Verduret smiled, like one who had his reasons for estimating M. de Clameran's fears at their true worth.

"Well, well!" he said, "do you know, your bourgeois is n't absolutely devoid of intelligence? And then?"

"Thereupon, patron, Lagors turns green and exclaims: 'If it's so serious, we must get rid of the hussy!' He's going on well, the young one! But my bourgeois began to laugh and shrug his shoulders. 'You're nothing but a fool,' says he; 'when you are bothered by a woman of that sort, you must take measures to get rid of her under the forms of law.' That idea made them laugh heartily."

"I should think so!" said M. Verduret, approvingly; "it's an excellent idea; the difficulty is that it's too late to put it in practice. The 'nothing' that Clameran was afraid of has already fallen into an intelligent ear. However, as I don't want those fellows to jumble up my cards, we must notify the Bureau of Public Morals."

"That is already done, patron," said Joseph, delightedly.

With feverish, panting interest Prosper listened to this report, every word of which cast additional light, so to speak, upon the matter in hand. He could understand now, he thought, the fragment of Gypsy's letter. This Raoul, who had possessed his entire confidence, could not be, he realized it now, anything better than a miserable villain. A thousand circumstances, unnoticed heretofore, rushed into his mind, and he asked himself how he could have been blind so long.

Master Joseph, meanwhile, continued:—

"Yesterday, after dinner, my bourgeois made him-

self as fine as a fiancé. I shaved and curled him, perfumed him and beautified him generally, after which he ordered his carriage and I drove him to Rue de Provence, to M. Fauvel's."

"What!" cried Prosper, "after his insulting words on the day of the theft, he was impudent enough to go there again!"

"Yes, my young gentleman, he was impudent enough to do it, and in fact he stayed there all the evening, until nearly midnight, to my great discomfort, for I was drenched like a rat on my box."

"How did he seem when he came out?" queried M. Verduret.

"Not so self-satisfied as when he went in, that is certain. When I had put up my horse and housed my carriage, and went and asked him if he wanted anything, I found his door locked and he shouted insults at me through the panels."

And, to assist in digesting that humiliation, Master Joseph took a swallow of absinthe.

"Is that all?" M. Verduret asked. "All for yesterday, yes. This morning the bourgeois slept late and was still as ugly as a bull-dog when he got up. At noon the other one, Raoul, arrived, also in a savage mood. They began at once to quarrel—and such quarrelling!—I tell you, street porters would have blushed to hear them. At one time my tall villain of a bourgeois grabbed the little one by the throat and shook him like a plum-tree; I thought he surely would strangle him. But Raoul's no fool, he pulled a pretty little knife out of his pocket, and on my word the other one was afraid; he let go and calmed down."

"But what did they say?"

"Ah! there's the rub, patron," said Master Joseph,

piteously; "they talked English, the hounds, so that I could n't understand. I'm sure of one thing, though, and that is that they were quarrelling about money."

"How do you know that?"

"Because at the time of the Universal Exposition I learned how people say 'money' in all the languages of Europe, and that word kept coming out every minute in their talk."

M. Verduret drew his eyebrows together and mumbled an unintelligible monologue, while Prosper, who was watching him closely, wondered if by any chance he was attempting to reconstruct, by his unaided reflection, the dispute whose precise significance had escaped the servant.

"At the end," continued Master Joseph, "when my rascals had calmed down, they talked French again. But, damnation! they talked about nothing then but matters of no importance — of a fancy dress ball to be given to-morrow by some bankers. But, as he walked to the door with the little one, my bourgeois said to him: 'As long as the scene is inevitable, it might as well come to-day, so stay at home, at Vésinet, to-night;' and Raoul answered, 'Very well.'"

Night was falling. The room was gradually filling with customers who shouted their orders for absinthe or bitters all at once. The waiters, standing on stools, held matches to the gas-jets, which lighted with muffled explosions.

"You must be off," said M. Verduret to Joseph; "your master might need you, and here's some one who wants to speak to me. Until to-morrow."

This some one was no other than Cavaillon, more worried and more tremulous than ever. He glanced uneasily on all sides, as nervous as a pickpocket

who knows that all the police of Paris are on his tracks. Nor did he sit at M. Verduret's table. He exchanged a furtive grasp of the hand with Prosper, and not until he had assured himself that no one was watching him, did he venture to hand M. Verduret a small parcel, saying: —

“This is what she found in a cupboard.”

It was a richly bound prayer-book. M. Verduret rapidly turned the leaves, and soon found the pages from which the words pasted on the letter received by Prosper the night before had been cut.

“I had moral proofs,” he said, as he handed the book to the young man; “here is a material proof which alone is sufficient to save you.”

At sight of the book Prosper had turned pale. For he recognized it. He himself had given Madeleine that prayer-book in exchange for the consecrated relic. And, in fact, Madeleine had written on the fly-leaf: “Souvenir of Notre-Dame-des-Fourvières, January 17, 1868.”

“Why, this book is Madeleine's!” he cried.

M. Verduret did not reply. He had risen to go to meet a young man dressed like a wine-dealer's clerk, who had just come in. He had no sooner cast his eye over a note which this young man handed him than he returned to the table in a state of extraordinary excitement.

“We have them now, perhaps!” he exclaimed.

And tossing a five-franc piece on the table, without a word to Cavaillon, he hurried the amazed Prosper into the street.

“What a fatality!” he said, as they ran along the sidewalk; “we may miss them. We shall certainly reach the Saint-Lazare station too late for the train to Saint-Germain.”

"Why, where are we going, in Heaven's name?" asked Prosper.

"Come, come; we will talk on the way."

When they reached Place du Palais-Royal, M. Verduret stopped beside one of the cabs at the stand there, having gauged the horses at a glance.

"How much do you want to take me to Vésinet?" he asked the driver.

"I don't know the way."

But the name Vésinet told Prosper the whole story.

"I'll show you the way," he said eagerly.

"In that case," said the cabman, "at this time of day, and in this beastly weather, it will be — twenty-five francs."

"And how much more do you ask to go fast?"

"*Dame!* that will depend on your generosity, bourgeois; but if you should say thirty-five francs, I think —"

"You shall have a hundred," M. Verduret interposed, "if you overtake a cab that has half an hour's start of us."

"*Tonnerre de Brest!*" cried the cabman, joyfully; "get in quick, you're making me lose a minute."

And, enveloping his lean nags with a threefold crack of his whip, he started off at a gallop along Rue de Valois.

X

WHEN you leave the little railway station of Vésinet, you find two roads in front of you. One to the left, a carefully kept, macadamized road, leads to the village, whose new church you can see through the trees; the other, to the right, recently laid out

and hardly gravelled, leads into the woods. Along this last-mentioned road, which will be a street within five years, the houses are very few and far between; built in deplorable taste for the most part, and standing amid scattered clumps of trees; the rustic retreats of Parisian tradesmen, unoccupied during the winter.

It was at the junction of these two roads, about nine o'clock at night, that Prosper stopped the cab which he and M. Verduret had entered on Place du Palais-Royal. The cabman had earned his hundred francs. The horses were exhausted, but, five minutes before, Prosper and M. Verduret had distinguished the light cast by the lanterns of a hired vehicle like their own, rolling along about fifty yards ahead of them.

M. Verduret, alighting first, handed the cabman a bank-note.

"Here is what I promised you," he said. "You will go to the first public-house you find on the right as you enter the village. If we have not joined you there an hour hence, you are at liberty to return to Paris."

The cabman confounded himself in expressions of gratitude; but neither Prosper nor his companion heard them. They had darted at full speed along the right-hand road.

The weather which was so execrable when they started that it had caused the cabman to hesitate, had become even worse. The rain was falling in torrents, and a violent wind shook as if it would shatter them the black branches of the trees, which collided with a dismal noise. The darkness was profound, dense, and made even more lugubrious by the twinkling lights of the station, which could be seen in the dis-

tance, flickering and apparently on the point of going out before the powerful gusts.

For five minutes M. Verduret and Prosper ran along in the middle of the road, drenched and splashed with mud; suddenly the cashier halted.

"We are there," he said; "this is where Raoul lives."

In front of the iron gate of an isolated house stood a cab, the one M. Verduret and his companion had seen in front of them. Lying back on his box, with his cloak wrapped about him, the cabman was fast asleep, in spite of the rain and wind, awaiting the return of the customer he had driven thither.

M. Verduret walked up to the cab and pulled the driver's cloak.

"I say, my good fellow!" he shouted.

The driver woke with a start and instinctively gathered up his reins, stammering:—

"All right, bourgeois, all right!"

But when, by the light of his lanterns, he saw those two men in that deserted spot, he imagined that they had designs on his purse, and—who could say?—on his life, and he was horribly frightened.

"I am taken!" he said, waving his whip; "I am engaged!"

"I know that, you fool!" said M. Verduret, "and all I want of you is one little piece of information, for which I will pay you a hundred sous. Did n't you drive a middle-aged woman to this house?"

That question, that promise of five francs, far from reassuring the cabman, changed his fear into downright terror.

"I told you once to go about your business," he replied. "Be off, or I'll call for help."

M. Verduret hastily retreated.

"Let us go," he whispered in Prosper's ear; "this beast will do as he says, and once the alarm is given, farewell to our plans. We must find some other way than the gate to get in."

And they skirted the garden wall, seeking a promising spot to climb it. This spot was not easily found in the darkness, the wall being ten or twelve feet high. Luckily M. Verduret is very agile. Having selected the lowest point, he stepped back, ran a few steps, and, with a spring of prodigious force on the part of so stout a man, succeeded in grasping the edge of the stone coping of the wall. With the aid of his feet he pulled himself up by sheer strength of wrist, and was soon sitting astride the wall.

It was Prosper's turn to go up, but, although younger than his companion, he had not his muscular strength, and M. Verduret was obliged not only to help him climb up, but to help him climb down on the other side.

Once in the garden, M. Verduret set about studying the ground. The house occupied by M. de Lagors stood in the centre of a very large garden. It was a narrow house and comparatively high, having two floors above the ground-floor, and an attic above. A single window, one on the second floor, was lighted.

"You have been here a score of times and should know the house," said M. Verduret; "can you tell me what room it is in which we see the light?"

"Raoul's bedroom."

"Very good. Now for the arrangement of the house; what is there on the ground-floor?"

"Kitchen, pantry, a billiard-room, and the dining-room."

"And on the first floor?"

"Two salons separated by folding-doors, and a study."

"Where do the servants sleep?"

"Raoul has none just now. He has some people from Vésinet to wait on him, a man and his wife, who come in the morning and go away at night, after dinner."

M. Verduret rubbed his hands in great glee.

"Then all goes well," he said! "It will be devilish strange if we don't succeed in overhearing something of what Raoul and the person who has come from Paris at this hour and in such weather have to say to each other. Let us go in."

Prosper made a gesture of protest. The suggestion seemed to him decidedly cool.

"Can you think of doing it, monsieur?" he said.

"Well, upon my word!" retorted the stout man, in a bantering tone; "what in Heaven's name do you suppose we came here for? Did you anticipate a pleasure party?"

"We may be discovered."

"What then? At the slightest sound which might betray our presence you go forward boldly, like a friend who has come to make a call upon his friend and has found all the doors open."

But, as ill luck would have it, the door—a door of solid oak—was locked, and M. Verduret shook it to no purpose.

"What imprudence!" he muttered in a tone of vexation; "one should always carry his tools about him. A miserable lock that could be opened with a nail, and not so much as a bent pin, a bit of iron wire!"

Realizing the fruitlessness of his efforts, he left the door and ran to all the windows on the ground-floor,

one after another. Alas! all the blinds were drawn and securely fastened.

M. Verduret seemed intensely annoyed. He prowled around the house, like a fox around a hen-coop, furious with rage, seeking an entrance and finding none. Despairing of success, he returned and stationed himself at that point in the garden where he had the best view of the lighted window.

"If we only could see!" he cried. "To think that there — there —" and he shook his fist at the window — "is the key to the enigma, and that we are separated from it only by the thirty or forty feet of these two floors!"

Never had Prosper been so surprised by his strange companion's behavior. It seemed as if he were at home in that garden, into which he had made his way by escalade; he went here and there without precaution; one would have said that he was so accustomed to such expeditions that the silence seemed perfectly natural to him; and he talked about picking the lock of an occupied house as coolly as an ordinary citizen would speak of opening his snuff-box. And he was quite insensible, moreover, to the vile weather, to the high wind, the rain which continued to fall, and the mud through which he splashed. He had approached the house and was estimating distances and calculating, as if he had had the insane hope of hoisting himself up that smooth wall.

"I must see," he said; "I will see."

Suddenly a recollection flashed through Prosper's mind.

"Why, there's a ladder here!" he cried.

"And you didn't tell me! Where is it?"

"At the foot of the garden, under the trees."

They hurried thither and found it, not without dif-

difficulty, lying against the wall. To take it up and carry it to the house was a matter of an instant. But when they had placed it against the house, they found that, even by holding it straighter than prudence advised, it lacked six good feet of reaching the lighted window.

"We shall not succeed!" said Prosper, thoroughly discouraged.

"We shall succeed!" cried M. Verduret, triumphantly.

Thereupon, standing about three feet from the house, and facing it, he seized the ladder, raised it carefully, and rested the lowest rung on his shoulders, holding the uprights as high as possible. The obstacle was overcome.

"Now up you go," he said to his companion.

The situation was extremely painful to Prosper, but he did not hesitate. The enthusiasm born of the surmounting of the difficulty, the hope of triumph, gave him a strength and agility which he did not know that he possessed. He gently drew himself up to the lower rungs and started up the ladder, which shook and swayed under his weight.

But his head was hardly above the window-sill, when he uttered a loud outcry, a terrible outcry, which was drowned by the roaring of the storm, and let himself slide, or rather fall, to the rain-soaked earth, crying: —

"Villain! villain!"

With extraordinary promptitude and strength, M. Verduret rested the end of the heavy ladder on the ground and ran to Prosper, fearing that he was dangerously injured.

"What did you see?" he asked. "What's the matter?"

But Prosper was already on his feet. Although the fall had been severe, he was in one of those mental crises when the sovereign mind dominates the animal nature so absolutely that the body is insensible to pain.

"The matter is," he replied in a hoarse, jerky voice, "that Madeleine — you understand, Madeleine! — is up there in that room, alone with Raoul!"

M. Verduret was speechless. He, the infallible man, had been so led astray by his deductions! He was well aware that it was a woman who was with M. de Lagors; but, according to his conjectures, according to the note Gypsy had sent him at the wine-shop, he believed that the woman was Madame Fauvel.

"Are you sure you're not mistaken?" he asked.

"Yes, monsieur, yes indeed! I could never mistake any other woman for Madeleine. Ah! you heard her yesterday; now tell me, ought I to have expected such infamous treachery as this? 'She loves you,' you said; 'she loves you!'"

M. Verduret did not reply. Dazed at first by his error, he was now trying to discover its causes, and already his keen intellect had begun to detect them.

"So this is the secret surprised by Nina!" continued Prosper. "Madeleine, the noble and chaste Madeleine, in whom I had as perfect faith as in my mother, is the mistress of this impostor, who has stolen even the name he bears! And I, an idiot of an honest man, selected that villain for my best friend! It was to him that I went with my suffering and my hopes — and he was her lover! And I, doubtless, furnished amusement for their meetings; they laughed at my absurd love, my stupid confidence!"

He broke off, overcome by the violence of his emotions. Laceration of the self-esteem adds a keen pang to the most excruciating agony. The certainty that he had been so shamelessly fooled and betrayed excited him to delirium.

"But enough of humiliations like this," he continued, in a tone of inexpressible fury; "it shall not be said that I bent my neck under the foulest insults, like a dastard!"

He was about to rush toward the house; M. Verduret, who was watching his movements as closely as the darkness permitted, detained him.

"What do you propose to do?"

"Have my revenge. Ah! I shall find a way to break in the door, now that I no longer dread the noise nor the scandal, and that I have nothing more to lose. I no longer desire to steal into the house like a thief; I propose to enter as a master, as a man who has been mortally insulted and comes to demand satisfaction for the insult."

"You won't do that, Prosper."

"Who will hinder me, pray?"

"I will!"

"You? — No, do not hope to do it. To appear before them, confound them, kill them both and then die, that is what I am determined upon, and it is what I am going to do."

If M. Verduret's wrists had not been of steel, Prosper would have escaped him. There was a short struggle between them, but M. Verduret won.

"If you make a noise," he said, "if you give the alarm, it's all over with our hopes."

"I have no hope."

"Raoul, being put on his guard, will escape us, and you remain dishonored."

"What does it matter to me?"

"But it matters to me, my good fellow! to me who have sworn to establish your innocence. At your age, one can always find a mistress, but one can never recover his lost honor."

In the eyes of genuine passion there are no external circumstances. M. Verduret and Prosper stood there in the rain, drenched to the bone, with their feet in the mud — and they argued.

"I propose to have my revenge!" said Prosper, with the idiotic obstinacy of the fixed idea; "I propose to have my revenge!"

"Have your revenge, well and good!" cried M. Verduret, beginning to lose his temper, "but like a man, and not like a child."

"Monsieur!"

"Yes, like a child. What will you do when you're inside the house? Have you any weapons? No. So you rush upon Raoul and have a hand-to-hand fight with him. Meanwhile Madeleine will run out to her cab — and then what? Will you be one whit better off?"

Crushed by the consciousness of his manifest helplessness, Prosper held his peace.

"Suppose you were armed!" pursued M. Verduret; "one must be mad to kill a man whom he can send to the galleys."

"What am I to do, then?"

"Wait. Revenge is a luscious fruit, which you must leave to ripen."

Prosper was shaken; M. Verduret realized it, and he put forth his last argument, the surest, the one he held in reserve.

"Moreover," he added, "how can we be sure that Mademoiselle Madeleine is here on her own account?"

Did we not arrive at the conviction that she is sacrificing herself? The superior will which compelled her to banish you may well have forced her to this step she has taken to-night."

The voice that speaks in conformity with our dearest hopes will always be listened to. This supposition, apparently so improbable, made an impression on Prosper.

"In truth," he muttered, "who knows?"

"I would find out, I promise you, if I could see," said M. Verduret.

For a moment Prosper did not reply.

"Will you promise me, monsieur," he said at last, "to tell me your whole thought, the whole truth, however distressing it may be to me?"

"I swear it on my word of honor!"

Instantly, with a strength of which he would not have deemed himself capable a few moments earlier, Prosper raised the ladder and placed the lowest rung on his shoulders, as his companion had previously done.

"Go up!" he said.

In a second, and so lightly, so skilfully that he did not once jar the ladder, M. Verduret was at the window.

Prosper had seen only too truly. It was Madeleine who was in Raoul de Lagors' apartment, alone, at that hour of the night. She had retained, M. Verduret noticed at once, her outer garments, her hat, and her heavy cloak. She was standing in the middle of the room, talking with great animation. Her attitude, her gestures, her countenance betrayed intense indignation held in check with much difficulty, and a certain ill-disguised contempt.

Raoul sat on a low chair near the fireplace, poking the fire with the tongs. At times he raised his arms

or shrugged his shoulders, like a man who is resigned to listen to anything, and whose invariable answer is, "I can do nothing."

Unquestionably M. Verduret would have given the pretty ring he wore on his finger to hear something, were it no more than ten words, of the conversation; but, on account of the high wind, not the faintest murmur reached his ear, and he dared not put his ear to the glass for fear of being discovered.

"Evidently this is a quarrel," he thought, "but it is equally clear that it's no lovers' quarrel."

Madeleine, meanwhile, continued to speak, and by dint of studying Lagors' face, which he could see very well, lighted up as it was by a lamp standing on the mantel, he hoped to discover the meaning of the scene. At times Raoul started, despite his apparent indifference, or he would strike the wood more viciously with his tongs; doubtless some more direct reproach made him smart at such times.

Madeleine, in desperation, descended to entreaty; she clasped her hands, she bowed her head, she was almost on her knees. He turned his face away. He replied only by monosyllables.

Two or three times Madeleine seemed to be on the point of withdrawing, but as often she returned, as if, having come thither to ask a favor, she could not decide to go away without obtaining it. At last she seemed to have hit upon some decisive argument, for Raoul suddenly rose, opened a little cabinet near the fireplace, and took from it a bundle of papers, which he handed to her.

"Oho!" thought M. Verduret, "what devil's own game are they playing? Can it be that this girl came here to demand the return of a compromising correspondence?"

Madeleine, who had taken the papers, did not seem satisfied even then. She continued to talk as if she were insisting that something else should be given her. Raoul refused, and she tossed the package on the table.

Those papers puzzled M. Verduret exceedingly. They were scattered over the table, and he could see them quite plainly. They were of several colors, — gray, green, and red.

"I can't be mistaken," thought M. Verduret, "I am not blind; those are pawn-tickets from the Mont-de-Piété!"

Madeleine was looking over the papers as they lay on the table. She took three, which she folded and put in her pocket, and pushed the others away with manifest disdain. She was determined to go this time, for, at a word from her, Raoul took the lamp to light her to the door.

There was nothing more for M. Verduret to see. As he descended the ladder with infinite precautions, he muttered: —

"Tickets from the Mont-de-Piété! What infamous mystery is hidden behind this affair?"

First of all, it was necessary to conceal the ladder. Raoul, after escorting Madeleine to the gate, might take it into his head to take a few steps in the garden, and he might, notwithstanding the darkness, discover the ladder, which, as it stood, was outlined against the wall.

In hot haste M. Verduret and Prosper laid it on the ground, heedless of the shrubs they crushed, and took up their positions where the darkness was most dense, in a spot from which they could watch the house door and the gate at the same time.

Almost at the same moment Raoul and Madeleine

appeared on the stoop. Raoul placed his lamp on the top step; he offered the young woman his hand, but she spurned it with a gesture instinct with insulting haughtiness, which Prosper saw and which poured balm into his wounds. This scorn seemed neither to surprise nor to touch Raoul; he answered simply with the ironical wave of the hand which means, "As you please!" He went to the gate, opened and closed it himself, then hurried back to the house, while Madeleine's cab started off at a rapid pace.

"Now, monsieur," said Prosper, tortured by doubt, "remember that you promised me the truth, whatever it might be. Speak, have no fear, I am strong."

"You must be strong against joy, then, my friend. Before a month has passed you will bitterly regret your insulting suspicions of this evening. You will blush at the thought that you could ever have believed that Madeleine was the mistress of a Lagors."

"But, monsieur, appearances!"

"Ah! appearances are just what we should distrust. *Pardieu!* a suspicion, false or true, is always based on something. But we cannot talk on here forever; your knave of a Raoul locked the gate, I saw him; we must go out the way we came in."

"But the ladder?"

"Let it stay where it is; as we could not efface our tracks, the whole will be charged to thieves."

Again they climbed the wall. They had not taken fifty steps on the road when they heard the sound of a gate closing. Then they heard footsteps, and ere long a man passed them, going toward the station. When he was some distance ahead, —

"That's Raoul," said M. Verduret; "our *soi-disant* servant, Joseph, will tell us that he went to give

Clameran an account of the scene. If they will only be kind enough to speak French ! ”

He walked on a moment without speaking, trying to join the broken ends of the thread of his deductions.

“ How the devil,” he suddenly resumed, “ did this Lagors, who seems to care for nothing but society, dissipation, and cards, ever come to select an isolated house at Vésinet ? ”

“ Undoubtedly because M. Fauvel’s country-house is only fifteen minutes’ walk from here, on the Seine,” replied Prosper.

“ That’s an explanation so far as the summer goes ; but what about the winter ? ”

“ Oh ! in winter he has rooms at the Hôtel du Louvre, and he has an apartment in Paris at his disposal all the year round.”

All this did not enlighten M. Verduret ; he quickened his pace.

“ If only our cabman has n’t gone ! ” he muttered. “ We can’t think of taking the train that will soon pass ; we should meet Raoul at the station.”

Although much more than an hour had passed since Prosper and his companion had alighted at the junction of the two roads, the cab which had brought them from Paris was still standing in front of the public-house indicated by M. Verduret. The cabman had not been able to resist the longing to break the hundred-franc note earned by his horses ; he had ordered dinner ; the wine was to his liking and he had stayed on.

The sight of his passengers delighted him. He would not have to return to Paris empty. But he was exceedingly surprised at the condition in which they appeared before him.

"What the deuce have you been doing to yourselves?" he cried.

Prosper replied simply that, while going to call on one of their friends, they had lost their way and had fallen into a bog, — as if there were bogs in Vésinet wood!

"So that's the way of it!" said the cabman.

He seemed to be content with the explanation. In reality he was not far from believing that his two passengers had attempted, even if they had not committed, some crime. This last opinion was evidently that of the few persons present, for some singular glances were exchanged.

But M. Verduret cut short all comments.

"Are we going or not?" he inquired, in his most authoritative tone.

"Right away, bourgeois," replied the cabman; "time to settle the bill and I'm at your service. Get in."

The return journey was mortally long and silent. Prosper began by trying to make his strange companion talk, but as he replied only by monosyllables, he felt that his self-esteem required him to hold his peace. He was irritated by the consciousness that this man was exerting a more and more irresistible influence over him. His physical surroundings added to his weariness. He was numb with cold, frozen to the very marrow, and he felt an irresistible drowsiness stealing over him, which enveloped his thoughts in a dense fog. For, although there may be no bounds to the power of the imagination, the physical forces are limited. After the effort comes the reaction.

Buried in a corner, with his feet on the forward seat, M. Verduret seemed to be asleep, but he was never more wide-awake. He was as dissatisfied as possible.

This expedition, which would, he had felt sure, put an end to his hesitation, ended in a new complication. All the threads which he had thought that he held securely had broken in his hands.

Doubtless the facts remained the same in his view, but the circumstances had changed. He could no longer imagine what common motive, what complicity, moral or material, what hidden influences impelled the four actors in his drama, Madame Fauvel and Madeleine, Raoul and Clameran, to act in concert. And he was ransacking his fertile mind, a very encyclopædia of ruses, for some scheme which would turn the light upon this problem.

Midnight was striking when the cab stopped in front of the Hotel du Grand-Archange, and then only did M. Verduret, roused from his reflections, remember that he had not dined. Luckily, Madame Alexandre was sitting up, and in a twinkling a supper was improvised. It was something more than consideration, something more than respect which she lavished on her guest. While he was eating, Prosper noticed with interest that she regarded his companion with a sort of open-mouthed admiration.

Having finished his meal, M. Verduret rose.

"You will not see me during the day to-morrow," he said; "but at night, about this time, I will be here; perhaps I shall have the luck to find what I am seeking at MM. Jandidier's ball."

Prosper almost fell from his chair. What! M. Verduret actually proposed to appear at a festivity given by the wealthiest bankers of the capital! That, then, was his reason for sending him to the costumer's.

"Are you invited?" he asked.

A sly smile gleamed in M. Verduret's expressive eyes.

"Not yet," he replied, "but I shall be."

Oh, contradiction of the human mind! Prosper was tortured by the most poignant anxieties; and yet, as he glanced sadly about his room, thinking of M. Verduret's plans, he murmured: —

"Ah! he is a lucky man! he will see Madeleine to-morrow, lovelier than ever in her maid-of-honor's costume!"

XI

ABOUT in the centre of Rue Saint-Lazare stand the twin mansions of MM. Jandidier, two famous bankers who would still be remarkable men even if stripped of the prestige of their millions. Would that as much could be said of all millionaires! These two houses, which, at the time of their completion a few years ago, caused the whole press to ring with cries of admiration, are absolutely distinct, but at the same time so arranged as to form but one, if desired.

When MM. Jandidier give a party, they have the thick movable partitions removed, and their salons are then the finest in all Paris. Princely magnificence, a marvellous appreciation of true comfort, a most thoughtful hospitality, all contribute to make these festivities more popular and more crowded than any others.

Wherefore, on the Saturday in question, Rue Saint-Lazare was crowded with carriages standing in line and awaiting their turns. At ten o'clock dancing was already in progress in the double salons.

It was a fancy dress ball. Almost all the costumes were exceedingly rich, many in most excellent taste, and some genuinely original. Among the last a

clown attracted special notice,—oh! a genuine clown, with the extraordinary countenance of the profession, the impudent eye, the gluttonous, mocking mouth, the inflamed cheek-bones, and a beard so red that it seemed to burn in the glare of the chandeliers.

The costume was absolutely in accordance with tradition: the boots had flaps at the top, the hat was becomingly dented, the lace shirt-frill was ravelling. He held in his left hand the staff of a sort of canvas banner, on which were six or eight pictures, coarsely painted, like the pictures exhibited by travelling showmen. In his right hand he waved a little switch, with which he tapped his banner at intervals, after the manner of mountebanks when making their harangues.

The guests surrounded the clown, expecting some clever quips from him, but he persistently kept his position near the door of the salon. Not until about half-past ten did he leave his post. At that moment M. and Madame Fauvel, accompanied by their niece Madeleine, had entered the room.

Almost immediately a compact group was formed near the door. For ten days past the affair of the bankers on Rue de Provence had furnished the most intensely interesting subject of conversation, and friends and enemies alike were most eager to accost them; the former to assure them of their sympathy, the others to offer those equivocal expressions of condolence which are the most offensive and irritating things on earth.

M. Fauvel, being enrolled in the battalion of serious-minded men, was not in fancy dress; he had simply thrown a short silk cloak over his shoulders. Madame Fauvel, née Valentine de la Verberie, hung on his arm, bowing and smiling with the most charm-

ing affability. She had been remarkably beautiful in years gone by, and on this evening, the witchery of costume and the illusion of the bright light aiding, she had recovered the freshness and brilliancy of youth. No one would ever have believed that she was forty-eight years of age, as she really was. She had chosen a court costume of the latter years of Louis XIV., magnificently yet severely simple, all satin and velvet, without a diamond, without a jewel. And she carried it with aristocratic ease of manner, having a grand air beneath her powder, as became a La Verberie who had made the mistake of marrying a moneyed man — so said some charitable souls.

But Madeleine was the one upon whom all eyes were fixed. She seemed a queen in very truth in her maid-of-honor's costume, which seemed specially designed to give full effect to the beauty of her figure. In the soft, perfumed atmosphere of the salons, in the bright light of the chandeliers, her beauty bloomed resplendent. Never had her hair been so black, never had her complexion appeared so white, never had her great eyes cast such gleams.

When they had entered the salon Madeleine took her aunt's arm, while M. Fauvel lost himself in the crowd, trying to find his way to one of the card-rooms, the refuge of serious men.

The ball was then at the height of its splendor. Two orchestras, under the magic batons of Strauss and one of his lieutenants, filled the two mansions with their melodious strains. The motley crowd moved hither and thither, in countless contrary currents, and there was a marvellous medley of gold brocades and satins, velvets and laces. Diamonds gleamed upon head-dresses and breasts, the palest cheeks flushed, eyes sparkled, and the shoulders of

the women shone resplendent, whiter than ever, like the snow in the first rays of the April sun.

The clown and his banner, both forgotten, had taken refuge in a window recess, and there he stood, with his elbow resting on the carved fastening of the sash. He seemed slightly moved by the sight of so much magnificence, and something of the excitement of his surroundings mounted to his brain. He did not, however, lose sight of a couple dancing a short distance from him.

It was Madeleine, leaning on the arm of a doge, with more gold about him than a gold sequin; and the doge was no other than the Marquis de Clameran. He seemed radiant, rejuvenated, and his eager attentions seemed to denote a recent triumph. At a lull in the quadrille, he leaned toward his partner and spoke to her with ill-restrained admiration. She seemed to listen to him, if not with pleasure, at least without irritation, shaking her head now and then and sometimes smiling.

"Evidently," muttered the clown, "that rascally noble is paying court to the banker's niece; in that case I was right yesterday. But, on the other hand, how can Mademoiselle Madeleine resign herself to listen so graciously to his insipid compliments and his declarations? Luckily Prosper is not here."

He broke off his soliloquy. A man well advanced in years, wearing with the utmost distinction the cloak of a noble Venetian, was standing before him.

"You know, Monsieur—Verduret," he said, half seriously, half jesting, "what you promised me?"

The clown bowed respectfully, very low, but with no indication of fawning or humility.

"I remember," he replied.

"Above all things, no imprudence."

"Monsieur le comte need have no fear; he has my word."

"It is well, monsieur; I know its value."

The count walked away; but during this brief colloquy the quadrille had come to an end, and the clown could no longer see M. de Clameran or Madeleine.

"I shall find them with Madame Fauvel," he thought. And he at once plunged into the crowd in search of the banker's wife.

Oppressed by the heat, which had become suffocating, Madame Fauvel had betaken herself, in quest of fresh air, to the great hall of the Jandidier mansions, transformed for this occasion, by virtue of the talisman called gold, into a fairy garden, full of orange trees, rose laurels in bloom, and white lilacs, their graceful clusters already drooping.

The clown espied her sitting near a clump of shrubbery, not far from the door of the card-rooms. At her right was Madeleine, at her left Raoul de Lagors in the costume of a *mignon* of Henri III.

"It must be admitted," reflected the clown, as he sought a convenient post of observation, "that there are no handsomer men than that young brigand."

Madeleine was sad now. She had pulled a camellia from a bush near by and was mechanically tearing off the petals, her eyes fixed on space.

Raoul and Madame Fauvel were leaning toward each other, talking. Their faces seemed calm, but the gestures of one, the nervous tremors of the other, clearly indicated an engrossing preoccupation and a conversation of the utmost gravity.

In the card-room the clown spied M. de Clameran, so placed that he could see Madame Fauvel and Madeleine without being seen.

"This is a continuation of yesterday's scene," he thought. "If I could only catch a few words! If I were behind those camellias, I am sure that I could hear."

He consequently began to manoeuvre with that object in view, but it was not easy to approach because he had to go around several groups of people. When he reached the desired spot Madeleine had just risen and was taking the arm of a Persian all studded with precious stones. At the same moment Raoul rose and walked into the card-room, where he whispered a few words to Clameran.

"That's how it is!" said the clown to himself; "those two villains have some hold on those two poor women, and they are struggling in vain to escape from their clutches. But how do they hold them?"

He was deep in thought when suddenly there was a great commotion in the hall. It was announced that there was to be a minuet of marvellous beauty in the grand salon; then the Comtesse de Commarin had just arrived as Aurora; and furthermore everybody was running to gaze at the Princess Korasoff's emeralds, the finest in the universe.

In an instant the hall was almost empty. No one remained there but a few poor lonesome creatures,—ill-tempered husbands whose wives were dancing, and some timid young men who were awkward and ill at ease in their costumes.

The clown concluded that the moment most propitious for his plans had arrived. He abruptly left his place, waving his banner, beating the canvas with his stick, coughing ostentatiously, like a man who is about to speak. He had crossed the hall and taken his stand between the arm-chair occupied by Madame

Fauvel and the door of the salon. All the guests who had remained in the gallery instantly ran up and formed a circle about him.

He had already assumed the traditional, swaggering attitude of his kind, his hat cocked very far over one ear, his body bent in the same direction with his hat. And it was with incredible volubility and in the most emphatically clown-like tone that he began:—

“Ladies and Gentlemen: This very morning I petitioned for a license from the authorities”—he bowed—“of this city. And why? In order, gentlemen, that I might have the honor of placing before you a spectacle which has already earned the commendation of the five quarters of the world and of several other learned societies. Within this booth, ladies, there is now about to begin the performance of a most extraordinary drama, first acted at Pekin, and translated by our most famous authors. Even now, gentlemen, seats may be taken; the footlights are lighted and the actors are dressing.”

He paused, and with an accuracy most humiliating to brass instruments and the bass drum, he mimicked the ear-piercing performance of a travelling showman's band.

“But, ladies and gentlemen,” he resumed, “you will say to me: ‘If the play is to be given in the booth, what are you doing here?’ I am here, gentlemen, to give you a foretaste of the agitations, sensations, emotions, palpitations, and other distractions which you can now procure at the absurd price of fifty centimes, or ten sous! You see this superb picture? Very good; it represents the eight most harrowing scenes of the drama. Ah! I see, you shudder! But this is nothing. This magnificent picture gives us no more accurate idea of the per-

formance than a drop of water gives us of the sea, or a spark, of the sun. My picture, gentlemen, is the latch of the door, or, as you might say, the odor that one inhales through a restaurant window."

"Do you know this clown?" an enormous Turk inquired of a melancholy Mister Punch.

"No, but he imitates the trumpet very well."

"Oh, very well! But what is he driving at?"

What the clown was driving at was, first of all and above all, to attract the attention of Madame Fauvel, who, since Madeleine and Raoul had left her, had fallen into a profound and doubtless painful reverie.

He succeeded. The blasts of that strident voice aroused the banker's wife to the consciousness of her surroundings; she started and glanced hastily all about, as if she had been abruptly awakened, then turned toward the clown.

He, meanwhile, continued: —

"So, gentlemen, we are in China. The first of the eight pictures on my canvas, up at the top here, at the left" — he pointed with his switch — "represents the illustrious Mandarin Li-Fo in the bosom of his family. The pretty young woman leaning on his shoulder is no other than his wife, and the children rolling on the floor are the fruit of the happiest of unions. Do you not detect, gentlemen, the perfume of contentment and of virtue which exhales from this superb work of art? Madame Li-Fo, you see, is the most virtuous of women, adoring her husband and idolizing her children. Being virtuous, she is happy; for, as Confucius has so well said, virtue has far more charms than vice!"

Madame Fauvel had gradually drawn nearer; she had even left her arm-chair for another nearer the clown.

"Can you make out anything like what he says, on the canvas?" the melancholy Punch inquired of his neighbor.

"Faith! no; can you?"

It was a fact that the canvas, a horrible daub, resembled that no more than anything else you please.

The clown, meanwhile, having imitated the roll of a drum, resumed his harangue, talking still faster:—

"Picture number two! ! This old lady sitting in front of a wardrobe with mirror panels, and tearing out her hairs, particularly the white ones, in desperation,—do you recognize her? No? Well, she is the mandarin's lovely wife of the first picture. I see tears in your eyes, ladies and gentlemen. Aye, weep! for even as she is no longer lovely, so she is no longer virtuous, and her happiness has disappeared with her virtue. Ah! it is a lamentable story! One day, nobody knows where, in some street in Pekin, she met a young brigand, handsome as an angel, and she loves him, unhappy creature, she loves him!"

It was in a most tragic voice and with a face to correspond, that the clown uttered these last words. During this tirade he had effected a half-wheel. He was now almost facing the banker's wife, and did not lose a single movement of her features.

"You are surprised, gentlemen," he continued, "but I am not. The great Bilboquet, my master, has taught us that the heart has no age, and the sturdiest shrubs grow upon ruins. The unfortunate creature! she is fifty years old, and she loves a mere boy! Hence the heart-rending, hair-pulling scene, which conveys a most useful lesson!"

"Upon my word!" murmured a cook in white satin, who had passed the evening reciting without

success a number of *menus*; "upon my word, I thought he would be more amusing."

"But we must look within the booth," continued the clown, "to see the most astonishing effects of the mandarin's wife's errors. At intervals a gleam of reason lights up her diseased brain, and the manifestations of her agony move the most pitiless to tears. Enter, and for ten sous you will hear such sobs as the Odéon never heard in its most glorious days. For, you see, she realizes the inanity, the folly, the absurdity of her passion; she admits that she is rushing in pursuit of a phantom; she knows only too well that he, radiant with youth, cannot love her, already old as she is, seeking in vain to cling to the remnants of a faded beauty. She feels that, when he occasionally whispers words of love in her ear, he is lying. She divines that one day or another his cloak will remain in her hands."

While declaiming this rigmarole with extreme volubility, and apparently to the group immediately surrounding him, the clown did not take his eyes from the banker's wife.

But nothing that he had said seemed to touch her. Half-reclining in her easy chair, she remained calm and her eye retained its limpidity; she even smiled faintly.

"Well, well!" thought the clown, somewhat disturbed; "am I following a false scent?"

Preoccupied as he was, he none the less noticed a new auditor, M. de Clameran, the doge, who had joined the circle.

"In the third picture," he resumed, rolling his *r*'s sonorously, "the old lady has dismissed her remorse, which was a troublesome tenant. She has said to herself that, in default of love, self interest would

bind the too seductive stripling to her side. With that object, having bestowed a spurious dignity upon him, she introduces him to the principal Mandarins of the capital of the Son of Heaven; then, as a pretty fellow must needs cut a swathe, she strips herself for his benefit of all that she possesses; bracelets, rings, necklaces, pearls, and diamonds, everything follows the same road. The monster carries all these baubles to the pawn-shop on Rue Tien-Tsi, and, more than that, he refuses to give up the pawn-tickets."

The clown had good reason to be satisfied. For a moment past Madame Fauvel had displayed symptoms, very manifest to him, of discomfort and agitation. Once she had tried to rise, to go away; but her strength failed her and she sat as if nailed to her chair, compelled to listen.

"However, ladies and gentlemen," continued the clown, "the richest jewel-cases give out at last. A day came when the mandarin's wife had nothing more to give. Then it was that the young brigand conceived the audacious scheme of seizing the Mandarin Li-Fo's enormous Jasper, that magnificent gem of incalculable value, the symbol of his dignity, which was deposited in a receptacle of solid granite, watched night and day by three soldiers. Ah! the woman resisted a long while. She knew that the innocent soldiers would certainly be accused, and that they would be crucified, as the custom is at Peking, and that thought weighed heavily upon her. But the other talked in such a tender voice that—well, you understand—the Jasper was stolen. The fourth picture represents the two culprits creeping stealthily down the secret staircase; observe their terrors; observe—"

He paused. Three or four of his auditors had

noticed that Madame Fauvel was on the point of swooning, and they hastened to her assistance.

Moreover, some one seized his arm in a powerful grasp. He turned quickly and found himself face to face with M. de Clameran and Raoul de Lagors, each as pale and threatening as the other.

"Your pleasure, messieurs?" he asked with his most affable air.

"Is to speak with you," they replied in the same breath.

"At your service."

And he followed them to the other side of the hall, into the recess of a window that opened on a balcony. There, no one was likely to think of watching them, nor in fact did any one watch them, except the man in a Venetian cloak to whom the clown had bowed so low, calling him "Monsieur le comte." Moreover the minuet was at an end, the orchestras were taking a half-hour's intermission, and the crowd poured into the hall, which all at once became too small.

Even Madame Fauvel's sudden indisposition had passed almost unnoticed; those who had been looking at her, seeing that she recovered instantly, attributed it to the heat. M. Fauvel had been notified; he had hurried to the spot, but, finding his wife talking quietly with Madeleine, he had returned to his game.

Less self-controlled than Raoul, M. de Clameran spoke first.

"In the first place, monsieur," he began in a surly tone, "I always like to know with whom I am talking."

But the clown had determined to persist in seeming to believe that it was all a fancy-ball jest, so long as they put no dots to their *i*'s. And he replied in the spirit and tone of his costume: —

"So you want to see my papers, do you, Signor Doge, and you, my mignon? I have papers, but they are in the hands of the authorities of this city, with my name, Christian names, age, profession, domicile and special marks."

M. de Clameran stopped him with a fierce gesture.

"You have just presumed to indulge in a most outrageous and shameless piece of impertinence!"

"I, Signor Doge?"

"Yes, you! What is this abominable fairy tale you have been telling?"

"Abominable! — it pleases you to call it so, but consider that I composed it! —"

"Enough, monsieur, enough; have at least the courage of your acts, and confess that it was simply a vile, long-winded innuendo aimed at Madame Fauvel."

The clown, with his head thrown back as if he were asking the ceiling for ideas, listened, open-mouthed, and with the bewildered air of a man who is, morally speaking, just falling from the clouds. To be sure, any one who had known him would have seen a gleam of satanic satisfaction in his black eye.

"Upon my word!" he said, apparently speaking to himself rather than answering his interlocutor, — "upon my word! that is a little too much! Where can any one find in my drama of the Mandarin Li-Fo's wife an allusion to Madame Fauvel, whom I don't know from Adam or Eve? It's of no use for me to search and fumble; upon my honor! I can't find anything of the sort. Unless — but no, that is impossible."

"Do you pretend," interposed M. de Clameran, "do you maintain that you know nothing of Monsieur Fauvel's misfortune?"

But the clown had fully made up his mind to have the facts stated.

"His misfortune?" he said in a tone of inquiry.

"I refer, monsieur, to the theft of which Monsieur Fauvel was the victim, and which, I had supposed, made noise enough to be heard by every one."

"Ah! yes, I know. His cashier decamped with 350,000 francs. *Pardieu!* that's a common occurrence, happens almost every day, I might say. But as for discovering any connection between this theft and my drama, why, that's another matter."

M. de Clameran did not reply at once. Lagors had nudged him violently with his elbow and calmed him as if by magic. He became colder than marble, and eyed the clown with a suspicious glance, seeming to regret bitterly the significant words that his excitement had extorted from him.

"Very good!" he said in the haughty tone which was familiar to him, "very good; I may have been mistaken; after your explanations I am content to acknowledge it and believe it."

But lo! the clown, who had been so stupid and humble but an instant before, bristled up at the word "explanation." He drew himself proudly to his full height, with his arms akimbo, exaggerating the attitude of defiance.

"I have given you no explanations, nor had I any to give you."

"Monsieur!"

"Let me finish, if you please. If I have unwittingly offended in any way the wife of a man whom I esteem, it is for him, it seems to me, as the sole judge and arbiter of that which concerns his honor, to inform me of the fact. He is too old, you will say, to come to me and demand satisfaction for an insult;

but he has sons, and one of them is here; I just saw him. You have asked me who I am; I, in my turn, ask you: Who are you, who, on your own authority, constitute yourself Madame Fauvel's champion? Are you a relative of hers, a friend, a connection by marriage? By what right do you insult her by pretending to discover an allusion in what is simply a tale intended to entertain?"

There was nothing to be said in answer to this straightforward and logical retort. M. de Clameran sought to evade the issue.

"I am M. Fauvel's friend," he said, "and as such, I am justified in being as jealous of his good name as of my own. And if this reason does not satisfy you, let me tell you that his family will very shortly be mine."

"Ah!"

"That is the fact, monsieur, and within the week my marriage to his niece, Mademoiselle Madeleine, will be formally announced."

The news was so entirely unforeseen, it was so extraordinary, that the clown was utterly and genuinely disconcerted for a moment. But it was a matter of a moment only. He bowed very low, with a smile just ironical enough to afford no ground of offence, and said: —

"Accept my congratulations, monsieur. Not only is Mademoiselle Madeleine the queen of the ball this evening, but she has, so they say, a dowry of half a million."

Raoul de Lagors had listened to this discussion with visible impatience and with anxious glances in all directions.

"We have had quite enough of this," he said in a short, contemptuous tone; "I have but one thing to

say to you, Master Clown, and that is that your tongue's too long."

"Perhaps, my pretty mignon, perhaps! But my arm is still longer."

Clameran too was in haste to have done with him.

"Enough," he said, tapping the floor with his foot; "we cannot talk with a man who conceals his identity under the tinsel of his costume."

"You are at liberty, Signor Doge, to go and ask the master of the house who I am — if you dare."

"You are," cried Clameran, "you are —"

A rapid gesture from Raoul arrested on the noble iron-master's lips an insult which would perhaps have led to blows, at all events to a challenge and the consequent scandal and publicity.

The clown waited a moment, with a mocking smile on his lips, and, as the insult was not forthcoming, sought M. de Clameran's eyes with his own and said slowly: —

"I am, monsieur, the best friend that your brother Gaston had in his lifetime. I was his adviser, I was the confidant of his last hopes."

These simple words fell like so many blows of a club on Clameran's head. He turned frightfully pale and fell back a step, putting out his hands as if a spectre had risen before him in the midst of the ball. He attempted to reply, to protest, to say something, but terror froze the words in his throat.

"Come, let us be off," said Lagors, who had retained his self-possession.

And he led him away, supporting him, for he staggered like a drunken man and clutched at the wall.

"Oh! oh!! oh!!!" exclaimed the clown in three different tones.

In truth he was almost as surprised as the iron-

master, and he remained, like a statue, in the window-recess. It was entirely at a venture that he uttered that mysteriously threatening sentence, with no definite object or intention, simply in order to have the last word, guided involuntarily by the marvellous instinct of the detective, which is the source of his great power, like the greyhound's keen scent.

"What does this mean?" he muttered. "Why was that wretch so frightened? What terrible memory did I evoke in his soul of mud? Let no one ever again praise the penetration of my mind, the subtlety of my plans! There is a master who, without an effort, surpasses us all, who in obedience to a sudden whim puts all our chimeras to rout, and that master is chance."

He was a hundred leagues from his present situation, from MM. Jandidier's ball, from the hall in which he stood. A light tap on his shoulder, from the man in the Venetian cloak, abruptly recalled him to reality.

"Are you satisfied, M. Verduret?" he asked.

"Yes and no, Monsieur le comte. No, because I have not completely attained the object which I had in view when I asked you to procure me an invitation to this festivity; yes, because our two blackguards have betrayed themselves in such fashion that doubt is no longer possible."

"And still you complain?"

"I do not complain, Monsieur le comte; on the contrary, I bless the chance, I should say, Providence, which has revealed to me the existence of a secret I did not suspect."

Five or six guests, who had caught sight of the count, and now accosted him, interrupted the conversation. The count moved away, but not without

bestowing a friendly, rather than patronizing salute upon the clown.

He at once laid aside his banner and darted into the crowd, which had become so dense that circulation was extremely difficult. He was looking for Madame Fauvel. She had left the hall, and he found her seated on a sofa in the main salon, talking with Madeleine. They were both greatly excited.

"Good!" thought the clown; "they are talking about the scene. But what has become of Lagors and Clameran?"

He soon caught sight of them. They were walking hither and thither, from one group to another, bowing and speaking to a multitude of persons.

"I would stake my head," muttered the clown, "that they are talking about me. Those honorable gentlemen are trying to find out who I am. Try again, my dear friends, try again."

But they soon abandoned the attempt. They were so preoccupied, they were so anxious to be alone in order to reflect and deliberate, that they did not wait for the supper, but went to take leave of Madame Fauvel and her niece, announcing that they were going away. And they did as they said. The clown saw them go to the dressing-room, take their cloaks, descend the broad staircase, and disappear through the door.

"All is over for to-night," he said; "I have no further business here."

And he, in his turn, took his leave, after donning a huge overcoat which almost entirely concealed his costume.

There were many unengaged cabs at the door, but the weather was fine, although cold, and the sidewalks dry; so the clown decided that he would return home

on foot, reflecting that the fresh air, the exercise, the brisk walk, would bring order into his ideas, which were still somewhat confused. Lighting a cigar, he walked up Rue Saint-Lazare and skirted Notre-Dame-de-Lorette on his way to Faubourg Montmartre.

Suddenly, just as he turned into Rue Ollivier, a man, leaping from the shadow in which he was hidden, rushed upon him with upraised arm, and struck with all his might. The clown, luckily for him, had the marvellous instinct of the cat, which turns itself inside out, so to speak, which can watch and defend itself at the same time, which can look in one direction, and see in the other. He saw, or rather, he divined the man crouching in the shadow, and, if we may so express it, felt him rushing upon him; and he was able to throw himself half backward on his sturdy legs, trying to parry the blow with his hands. This movement certainly saved his life, and he received on the arm the savage knife-thrust which would otherwise have killed him.

Anger, even more than pain, extorted an exclamation from him.

"Ah! *canaille!*" he cried; and leaping back a foot or two, he assumed an attitude of defence.

But it was a useless precaution. Seeing that he had missed his aim, the assassin did not return to the charge. He kept on his way and soon disappeared in Faubourg Montmartre.

"That is certainly Lagors," muttered the clown, "and Clameran cannot be far away. While I went around the church on one side, they went around the other and lay in wait for me here."

Meanwhile his wound was paining him cruelly. He went and stood under a street light to examine it. It was evidently in no wise serious, but it was very

long, and the blade had gone completely through the arm. He at once tore his pocket handkerchief into four strips, and wound them about his arm with the dexterity of an intern in a hospital.

"I must be on the scent of some very serious matters, to induce these wretches to try their hands at murder. Clever men like them, when they have nothing worse than the police court to fear, do not deliberately run the risk of the assize court."

However, it was not possible to stay in that spot. He made sure that if he chose to subject himself to more or less intense pain, he could still use his arm, and he started in pursuit of his foe, taking good care to keep in the middle of the street and to avoid the dark corners.

He could see no one, but he was none the less convinced that some one was following him. Nor was he mistaken. When he reached Boulevard Montmartre and crossed the street, he could make out two shadows, which he recognized, crossing at the same moment, a little higher up.

"I have a pair of determined villains to deal with," he muttered; "they don't even try to hide while following me. They are shrewd, they must be used to adventures of this sort, and I shall have difficulty in throwing them off the scent. It's of no use to try on these fellows the carriage trick that fooled Fanferlot so completely. Furthermore, my devilish gray hat is like a beacon-light in the darkness and can be seen a league away."

Thereupon he walked up the boulevard, and without turning his head felt that his enemies were about thirty paces behind.

"And yet," he said, pursuing his monologue in an undertone, "I must elude them at any price. I can-

not return, with them at my heels, either to my own house or to the Grand-Archange. They are not following me now to murder me, but to know who I am. Now, if they should suspect that the clown conceals M. Verduret, and that M. Verduret himself is a cloak for M. Lecoq, it is all up with my plans. They will be off to foreign lands, for they have plenty of money, and I shall have nothing to show but my expenses and my knife-thrust."

This idea, that Raoul and Clameran might escape him, exasperated him so that for an instant he thought of having them arrested. That was a simple matter enough. He had only to rush upon them, shouting for help; the police would come, they would all three be arrested and taken to the nearest station to be dealt with by the inspector.

This method, no less simple than ingenious, is employed by the members of the detective bureau when they suddenly fall in with some malefactor for whom they have been instructed to be on the lookout, and cannot, for lack of a warrant, take him into custody. The next day everything is explained.

Now the clown had sufficient evidence to hold Lagors in custody. He could show the letter and the mutilated prayer-book; he could disclose the existence of the pawn-tickets in their hiding-place at Vésinet; and he could show his arm. At the very least, Raoul would have to explain why and how he had stolen the name of Lagors, and with what object he passed himself off for a relative of Madame Fauvel. On the other hand, by acting thus precipitately, he would perhaps assure the escape of the principal culprit, M. de Clameran. What definite evidence was there against him? None. There were the strongest presumptions, but not one fact.

After due reflection the clown decided that he would act alone, as he had always done hitherto, and that he would succeed alone in discovering the truth of which he had caught a glimpse. Having determined upon this plan, he had simply to throw his pursuers off the scent.

He had taken the Boulevard de Sebastopol, and, quitting the undecided gait which betrayed his hesitation, he started off at a round pace. When he reached Place des Arts-et-Métiers he halted abruptly. He met two police officers and stopped them to ask some unimportant question. This manoeuvre had the result he anticipated; Raoul and Clameran hung back, not daring to approach nearer than twenty yards.

Twenty yards! — that was all the start the clown needed. As he talked with the officers, he rang the bell of the house in front of which they were standing. The sound made by the bell-rope having shown him that the door was ajar, he bowed and hastily entered the house.

A moment later, the officers having moved on, Clameran and Lagors in their turn rang the bell. The door was opened and they made the concierge get up, to ask him who it was who had just gone in, disguised as a clown. He had not seen anybody enter in fancy dress, he said, and, what is more, he had no knowledge that any of his tenants had gone out in disguise.

"After all," he added, "I cannot be sure about anything, as the house has another door on Rue Saint-Denis."

"We are balked!" interposed Lagors; "we shall never know who that clown is."

"Unless we find out only too soon, to our own discomfiture," murmured Clameran, in deep thought.

At the very moment that Raoul and the iron-master retired, disturbed beyond measure, the clown flew like an arrow to the Hôtel du Grand-Archange, where he arrived as the clock struck three. Prosper, leaning out of his window, saw him in the distance. Since midnight he had been waiting for him with the feverish impatience of an accused man awaiting the decision of his judges. Imagine, then, how eagerly he ran to meet M. Verduret, half-way down the stairway.

"What do you know?" he asked. "What have you learned? Have you seen Madeleine? Were Raoul and Clameran at the ball?"

But M. Verduret is not accustomed to talk in places where he may be overheard.

"First of all," he replied, "let us go to your room, and begin by giving me a bit of water to bathe this scratch, which burns like fire."

"Great God! you are wounded!"

"Yes, this is a memento of your friend Raoul. Ah! he will find out what it costs to make a hole in this skin!"

There was something so threatening in M. Verduret's passionless anger that Prosper was speechless.

Meanwhile his friend had finished bathing his arm.

"Now let us talk," he said to Prosper. "Our enemies are warned; we must strike them now with the rapidity of lightning."

M. Verduret spoke in a curt, imperious tone which was unfamiliar to Prosper.

"I made a mistake," he said; "I have been following a false scent; that is an accident which happens to the shrewdest. I took the effect for the cause, I may as well admit it. When I thought that I was assured that guilty relations existed between Raoul and Madame Fauvel, I believed that I held the end

of the thread which would lead us to the truth. I ought to have distrusted my theory; it was too simple, too natural!"

"Do you believe that Madame Fauvel is innocent?"

"No, certainly not, but she is not guilty in the way that I supposed. What were my suppositions? I said to myself: 'Madame Fauvel, having fallen in love with a fascinating young adventurer, has presented him with the name of one of her kinswomen and introduced him to her husband as her nephew. It was a clever ruse to open the doors of her house to adultery. She began by giving him such money as she had at her disposition; later she intrusted her jewels to him and he carried them to the Mont-de-Piété; finally, having nothing more of her own, she allowed him to put his hands into her husband's safe.' That is what I thought."

"And in that way everything is explained."

"No, that did not explain everything, and I knew it, and in that respect I acted with deplorable lack of reflection. How, on my first theory, are we to explain Clameran's sovereign influence?"

"Clameran is simply Lagors' accomplice."

"Ah! that is where you mistake. I too thought for a long while that Raoul was the whole story, whereas in truth he is nothing at all. Yesterday, in a dispute that occurred between them, the iron-master said to his former friend: 'And above all, my boy, don't think of resisting me, or I will crush you like glass.' That tells the story. The imaginary Lagors is not Madame Fauvel's creation, but Clameran's *âme damnée*. And again," he continued, "would our first suppositions give us the explanation of Madeleine's resigned compliance? It is Clameran, not Lagors, whom Madeleine obeys." Prosper

tried to protest. M. Verduret shrugged his shoulders imperceptibly. To convince Prosper, he had only to say a single word; he had simply to tell him that three hours earlier Clameran had announced to him his marriage with Madeleine. That word he made the mistake of not saying. Persuaded that he should attain his object in time to break off that marriage, he preferred not to add this cause of anxiety to his young protégé's troubles.

"Clameran," he continued, "Clameran alone holds Madame Fauvel under duress. Now, how does he hold her,—what terrible weapon assures his mysterious power? We have positive information which proves that they met fifteen months ago for the first time since their youth, and Madame Fauvel's reputation has always been above the breath of suspicion. We must seek in the past, therefore, the secret of this domination on the one side, and this resignation on the other."

"We shall learn nothing," murmured Prosper.

"On the contrary, we shall learn everything, when we know the story of Clameran's past. Ah! when I mentioned his brother Gaston's name to-night, Clameran turned pale and recoiled as if he had seen a ghost. And then I remembered that Gaston died suddenly, while his brother was visiting him."

"Do you believe it was a murder, in God's name?"

"I can believe anything of fellows who tried to murder me. The theft, my dear boy, is a mere secondary matter at this moment. The theft is easily explained, and if there were nothing more than that, I would say: 'My task is done; let us go to the examining magistrate and ask him for a warrant.'"

Prosper had risen, his chest inflated, his eye bright with hope.

"Oh! do you know — is it possible?"

"Yes, I know who gave the key; I know who gave the word."

"The key! it may have been M. Fauvel's. But the word —"

"The word, you wretch, you yourself revealed. You have forgotten, haven't you? Your mistress, luckily, has a memory for two. Do you remember that you supped with Madame Gypsy, Lagors, and two other friends of yours two days before the theft? Nina was depressed. Toward the end of the supper she picked a quarrel with you, claiming that you neglected her."

"Yes, I remember it very well indeed."

"And do you know what reply you made?"

Prosper thought a moment and answered: —

"No."

"Well, you poor, reckless creature, you said to Nina: 'You are wrong to reproach me with not thinking of you, for, at this very moment, your dear name guards my employer's safe.'"

Prosper made a frantic gesture. The truth exploded in his brain like a shell.

"Yes," he cried, "I remember."

"Then you can understand what happened. One of the two went to Madame Fauvel and forced her to give him her husband's key. The villain took the chance and placed the movable buttons to form the name Gypsy. The three hundred thousand francs were taken. And be sure of this, that Madame Fauvel yielded only in the face of terrible threats. She was near death on the day following the theft, and it was she who sent you the ten thousand francs, at the risk of ruining herself."

"But who stole the money? Was it Raoul? was it

Clameran? What means have they of putting compulsion on Madame Fauvel? How is Madeleine involved in all these horrors?"

"To these questions, my dear Prosper, I do not as yet know what reply to make, and that is why we are not going to the magistrate as yet. I ask you to give me ten days. If I have discovered nothing in ten days, I will return, and we will go and tell M. Patrigent what we know."

"What! you are going away?"

"In an hour I shall be on the way to Beaucaire. Both Clameran and Madame Fauvel, who was a Mademoiselle de la Verberie, are from that neighborhood."

"Yes, I know their families."

"Very good! I am going there to look them up. Neither Raoul nor Clameran can escape us; the police are watching them. But do you, Prosper, my dear fellow, be prudent. Promise me that you will remain a prisoner here so long as my absence lasts."

All that M. Verduret desired, Prosper willingly promised. But he could not let him go thus.

"Am I not to know who you are, monsieur, and to what motives I owe your all-powerful assistance and support?"

The extraordinary individual smiled a sad smile.

"I will tell you," he replied, "in Nina's presence, on the day before your marriage to Madeleine."

When Prosper was at last left entirely alone to his reflections, he fully realized how useful M. Verduret's omnipotent intervention had been to him. Reviewing the field of that mysterious protector's investigations, he was surprised, almost appalled at its extent. What a multitude of discoveries in less than a week — and with what precision he had gone forward, although

he pretended to have missed his way! With what unerring certainty he had progressed from inductions to deductions, from ascertained facts to probable facts, until he had constructed, if not the exact truth, a theory at all events so probable that it seemed indisputable!

Prosper was fain to confess that he himself, starting from nothing, would never have attained, unaided, this bewildering result. Not only did he lack M. Verduret's extraordinary keenness of insight, his subtlety of conception, his unerring scent and his audacity, but he did not possess that art, that science of compelling obedience, of transforming everybody into his agents and confederates, of causing events as well as men to take part in bringing about a desired result.

No longer having that friend of his adversity by his side, he pined for him. He regretted the absence of that voice, sometimes harsh and sometimes kindly, which encouraged or comforted him. He was alone now, so entirely alone that he was afraid, not daring, so to speak, to act or to think alone, more timid than the child abandoned by his nurse.

At all events, he had the good sense to follow his mentor's urgent recommendations. He shut himself up at the Grand-Archange, not even showing his face at the window.

Twice he had news from M. Verduret. The first time he received a letter in which his friend told him that he had seen his father, who had given him most useful assistance. The second time Dubois, M. de Clameran's valet, came on behalf of the man whom he called his "patron," to tell him that all went well.

Everything was in fact going as well as possible, when, on the ninth day of his seclusion, about ten in the evening, it occurred to Prosper that he would go

out. He had a violent headache, he had slept badly for several nights, and he thought that the fresh air would do him good.

Madame Alexandre, who seemed to have been admitted to the secret by M. Verduret to some extent, offered some objections, to which he paid no heed.

"What risk do I run at this time of night, in this neighborhood?" he said. "I will stroll along the quay as far as the Jardin des Plantes, and I certainly shall meet no one."

Unfortunately, he did not adhere strictly to that programme, and, being near the station of the Orléans railway, he entered a café and ordered a glass of beer. As he sipped the beer, he mechanically took up a newspaper, the *Soleil*, and in the article entitled, "News of the day," signed Jacques Durand, he read:—

"The marriage is announced of the niece of one of our most honored bankers, M. André Fauvel, and a Provençal nobleman, M. le Marquis Louis de Clameran."

Lightning striking the table at which he sat could not have produced such a lamentable effect upon Prosper. That shocking intelligence, coming upon him unexpectedly, through the medium of that messenger, indifferent to joy and sorrow alike, which is called a newspaper, demonstrated the justness of M. Verduret's ideas.

Alas! why did not that certainty inspire in him absolute faith, that is to say, the courage to wait, the strength to refrain from acting?

Frenzied by grief, losing his head, he fancied Madeleine indissolubly bound to that villain; he said to himself that M. Verduret might arrive too late, and that an obstacle must be raised at any price.

He asked the waiter for a pen and paper, and, forgetting that no possible emergency justifies that dastardly abomination known as an anonymous letter, he wrote to his former employer, disguising his handwriting as best he could: —

DEAR MONSIEUR, — You turned your cashier over to the courts, and you did well, for you were certain that he was unfaithful.

But if it was he who stole 350,000 francs from your safe, was it he also who stole Madame Fauvel's diamonds to take them to the Mont-de-Piété, where they are to-day?

If I were in your place, warned as you are, I would make no public scandal, but I would watch my wife and discover that one must always be suspicious of second cousins.

Furthermore, before signing Madeleine's marriage contract I would call at the prefecture of police and inform myself concerning the noble Marquis de Clameran.

A FRIEND.

Having finished his letter, Prosper quickly paid his reckoning and went out. Then, as if he feared that his denunciation might not arrive in time, he asked to be directed to a branch post-office, and mailed his letter on Rue du Cardinal-Lemoine.

Thus far he had had no doubts as to the propriety of what he had done. But at the last moment, when he had put his hand into the box and dropped the letter, when he heard the noise it made as it fell among the other letters, a thousand scruples crowded into his mind. Had he not done wrong to act so hastily? Would not that letter of his upset all M. Verduret's plans?

When he returned to the hotel his scruples changed to bitter regrets. Joseph Dubois had come in his

absence; he had come on receipt of a despatch from the "patron," announcing that his task was completed, and that he should arrive at the Lyon station at nine o'clock the next evening. Prosper passed through a moment of horrible depression. He would have given everything in the world to recover possession of the anonymous letter.

And he certainly had good cause for his distress. At that very hour M. Verduret was boarding a train at Tarascon, meditating a plan whereby he might derive the utmost advantage from his discoveries. For he had discovered everything. Combining with what he already knew, the narrative of a former maid-servant of Mademoiselle de la Verberie and the statements of an old servant of the Clamerans, utilizing the depositions of the Vésinet people who were in Lagors' service, depositions taken and sent to him by Dubois-Fanferlot, and assisted by memoranda furnished by the prefecture of police, he had, thanks to his marvellous genius for investigation and reasoning, succeeded in reconstructing in its entirety, even to the smallest details, the pitiful drama of which he had had a premonition. As he had divined and said, the causes of the crime laid at Prosper's door were to be sought in the distant, very distant past.

And this is the drama, as he had reduced it to writing for the benefit of the examining magistrate, saying to himself that his report would doubtless serve as a basis for the indictment.

THE DRAMA

XII

ABOUT two leagues from Tarascon, on the left bank of the Rhone, not far from Messieurs Audibert's wonderful gardens, may be seen the Château of Clameran, blackened by the lapse of years, neglected and dilapidated, but solid and substantial still.

There, in 1841, lived the old Marquis de Clameran and his two sons, Gaston and Louis. He was a singular personage, to say the least, was this old marquis. He was one of the race, to-day almost extinct, of pig-headed noblemen whose watches stopped in 1789 and who still have the time of another century. Attached to his illusions, even more fondly than to his life, the old marquis persisted in regarding the events that had occurred since '89 as a series of deplorable jests, of absurd outbreaks on the part of a handful of factious bourgeois.

He had been one of the first to emigrate on the heels of the Comte d'Artois, and had returned to France in 1815, on the heels of the allies. He should have blessed Heaven when he found intact a portion of the vast domains of his family, — a small portion, to be sure, but quite sufficient to enable him to live comfortably and honorably; but, he said, he did not consider that he owed God any gratitude for so small a matter. At the outset he had bestirred himself to obtain some position at court. Eventually, seeing that all his efforts were of no avail, he had determined to retire to his château, pitying and cursing in the

same breath his king whom he adored, and whom in the depths of his heart he called a Jacobin.

From that moment he had without difficulty accustoming himself to the free and easy-going life of a country gentleman. Having about fifteen thousand francs a year, he spent twenty-five or thirty thousand, always drawing on his principal, on the pretext that there would surely be enough to last until a genuine Restoration, which could not fail to restore all his estates.

His two sons followed his example and lived generously. Louis, the younger, was always in quest of adventures, always attending some festivity in the neighborhood, drinking deep, and playing for high stakes; Gaston, the older, on the other hand, sought to understand the tendencies of his time, working, reading, receiving in secret certain newspapers of which the mere titles would have seemed to his father blasphemy of the hanging sort.

The old marquis himself, enveloped in his selfish recklessness, was the happiest of mortals, eating heartily, drinking more heartily, hunting a great deal, well considered by the peasants and detested by the bourgeois of the neighboring towns, whom he overburdened with bitter jests that were sometimes amusing.

The time passed heavily with him only in summer, when the heat was intense in the valley of the Rhône, or when the mistral blew too fiercely. And even in that emergency he had an infallible source of diversion at hand, always new, albeit always the same, always piquant and enlivening. He talked ill of his neighbor, the Comtesse de la Verberie.

The Comtesse de la Verberie, the marquis's *bête noire*, as he ungallantly called her, was a tall, blood-

less woman, angular in form and temper, haughty, contemptuous, frigid with those whom she deemed her equals, and pitiless to the common herd.

Like her noble neighbor, she had emigrated with her husband, who was afterward killed at Lutzen, not in the French ranks, unfortunately for his memory.

In 1815 the countess had returned to France. But, while the Marquis de Clameran recovered enough to yield him a relative competence, she was able to obtain from her protectors and the royal munificence only the small estate and château of La Verberie and a pension of twenty-five hundred francs charged to the million of indemnity, upon which she lived.

To be sure, the château would have satisfied many ambitions. Being more modest in extent than the Manor of Clameran, the pretty little castle of La Verberie is less superb in aspect and makes fewer pretensions to splendor. But it is reasonably extensive, convenient, and well-arranged, and as quiet and easily kept in order as a great nobleman's *petite maison*. Moreover, it stands in the centre of a large park, and its carved windows look toward the rising sun.

A constant source of admiration to the whole region is this park, which extends from the Beaucaire road to the river; a perfect marvel, with its tall trees, its hedgerows, its clumps of shrubbery, its greensward, and its limpid brook, which runs throughout its whole length.

There lived the Comtesse de la Verberie, always complaining and cursing life. She had one daughter, at this time eighteen years of age, named Valentine, — a pale, light-haired, frail creature, with great, quivering eyes, lovely enough to make the stone saints start from their recesses in the village chapel, whither she went every morning to hear mass.

Indeed, the fame of her beauty had crossed the swift waters of the Rhône and spread far and wide. Often had the boatmen, and the sturdy bargemen who drive their powerful horses half in the water and half on the towing-path, seen Valentine sitting, book in hand, in the shade of the great trees on the river bank. From a distance, with her white dress, with her lovely hair half flying in the wind, she seemed to the imaginations of those rough but honest fellows like a mysterious apparition of happy augury. And the pretty little fairy of La Verberie was often spoken of between Arles and Valence.

If M. de Clameran detested the countess, Madame de la Verberie execrated the marquis. While he had nicknamed her the old Witch, she never referred to him otherwise than as the old Shallow-brain.

And yet they were born to understand each other, holding the same opinions concerning the important facts of life, with different ways of looking at them; that is to say, they were admirably situated to dispute forever, without ever agreeing or ever losing their temper. He, playing at philosophy, sneered at everything, and had an excellent digestion. She, clinging fast to her deadly animosities, grew thin with rage and green with jealousy.

But no matter! they might have passed some delightful evenings together. For they were neighbors, very near neighbors. From Clameran one could plainly see Valentine's black greyhound running along the paths of the park of La Verberie; and from La Verberie one could see the lights twinkle in the windows of the dining-room at Clameran.

Indeed the countess was in the habit of saying day after day and at the same hour — and in such a tone! — at sight of that daily illumination: —

" Ah! their orgies are beginning again! "

Between the châteaux there was just the river, the Rhône, which was very broad and swift at that spot, the banks being slightly raised and strengthened. But between the two families flowed a hatred deeper than the Rhône, more difficult to divert or to fill up.

What was the origin of this hatred? The countess and the marquis would have been sorely embarrassed to say with any precision. There was a story to the effect that a La Verberie had seduced and ruined a Clameran under Henri IV. or Louis XIII. The seduction had led to a duel; swords had flashed in the sunlight and blood been shed on the greensward.

That was all; and even these facts had not been very definitely understood at the time. But upon this quasi-historic canvas legend had laid its fantastic embellishments, and this simple narrative, handed down from generation to generation, passing from mouth to mouth, had become a dismal tragedy, full to overflowing of bloodshed, infamy, and horror.

This is why that happened which was about to happen, as is always the case in real life, and often in novels, which, after all, however exaggerated they may be, always retain a reflection of the actual facts which inspired them.

It happened that Gaston, having seen Valentine at a party, thought her beautiful and fell in love with her.

It happened that Valentine noticed Gaston, and was unable thereafter to keep from thinking of him.

But such a multitude of obstacles separated them! For nearly a year each of them religiously kept the secret buried like a treasure in the lowest depths of their hearts. And that year, made up of perilous but fascinating reveries, was destined to determine their future. The charms of the first impressions gave way

to a tenderer sentiment; then came love, each of them attributing to the other superhuman qualities, ideal perfection.

It is the fact that strong, sincere passion cannot flourish except in solitude; the air of cities is fatal to it, as to the robust flowers of the Southern plains, which lose their brilliancy and fragrance when transplanted to our hothouses.

Gaston and Valentine, having seen each other but once, were already all in all to each other when the fatality which had presided over their first meeting brought them together once more. They both passed a whole day with the old Duchess d'Arlange, who had come to the province to sell what little property she still owned there.

This time they talked together, and like old friends, surprised to find in each other echoes of the same thoughts.

Then they were again separated for many months. But, without any previous understanding, they both went to the bank of the Rhône at certain hours, and looked at each other across the river.

At last, one evening in the month of May, while Madame de la Verberie was at Beaucaire, Gaston ventured into the park and accosted Valentine. She was hardly surprised and not at all indignant. Genuine innocence has none of the tricks of manner and startled modesty in which conventional innocence muffles itself. It did not even occur to Valentine to order Gaston to go away.

For a long time they paced up and down the long avenue, she leaning on his arm. They did not say that they loved each other, they knew it; but they did say, with tears in their eyes, that their love was hopeless. They realized that they could never prevail

over the absurd hatred of their families; they mutually acknowledged that any attempt to do so would be mere folly. They swore that they would never forget each other, and promised never to meet again, no, never again — but once.

Alas! Valentine was more excusable than many other women would have been. A shy, loving heart, all her affectionate impulses had been restrained, congealed by the countess's harshness. Never had there been between Madame de la Verberie and Valentine one of those long private talks during which a good mother reads her daughter's heart like an open book. Madame de la Verberie saw nothing of her daughter but her beauty.

"Next winter," she would say to herself, "I will borrow some money, and take the girl to Paris, into society; and I shall be unlucky indeed if I can't find some amorous and wealthy suitor who will be ready to marry her for her fine eyes, and relieve me from the sickening mediocrity of my present plight." She called this loving her daughter!

And so the second meeting was not the last. And yet what difficulties there were in the way of their interviews! Gaston was unwilling to intrust his secret to a boatman, and he had to walk more than a league to find a bridge. Then it was that it occurred to him that to swim the river was much shorter; but he was a swimmer of only moderate ability, and to cross the stream at that spot was considered a very rash undertaking by the most skilful.

No matter! he practised in secret, and one evening Valentine was dismayed to see him emerge from the water almost at her feet. She made him swear never to repeat the exploit. He swore, and repeated it the next day, and every day thereafter.

But, as Valentine constantly fancied that she saw him carried away by the fierce current, they agreed upon a signal which should shorten the duration of her anxiety. When he was about to start, Gaston showed a light at one of the windows in the château of Clameran, and, fifteen minutes later, he was at his sweetheart's feet.

What were Gaston's and Valentine's plans and hopes? Alas, they made no plans, they had no hopes. With their eyes shut, without reflection, almost without fear, they abandoned themselves to the perilous happiness of meeting every day. Heedless of the thunderclap which was destined to wake them, they slumbered on in their present felicity.

Is not every sincere passion so constituted? Passion subsists by itself and on itself, rekindled by the very things which seem likely to extinguish it, absence and obstacles. It is sufficiently exclusive to worry about nothing, neither the future nor eventualities; it sees nothing outside of the gratification of the present moment.

Moreover, Valentine and Gaston thought they alone possessed the secret of their love. They had taken, they had continued to take, so many and such minute precautions! They kept such careful watch! They were so thoroughly persuaded that their conduct was a masterpiece of dissimulation and prudence! Valentine had always selected the hour when she was sure that her mother would not worry about her. Gaston had never confided in anybody, not even his brother Louis. They had vowed not to utter each other's names aloud. They denied themselves a moment, a last kiss, when they foresaw any risk therein.

Poor ingenuous lovers! As if anything could be

hidden from the idle perspicacity of country folk, from the ill-tempered curiosity, always on the alert, of empty, unoccupied minds, incessantly in search of some sensation, good, or evil, of some piece of gossip, be it harmless or deadly.

They believed that their secret was secure, and it had long since taken flight; the story of their amours, and their stolen meetings had long furnished food for conversation among the country people. Sometimes, in the evening, they had noticed a shadow, a boat gliding along the river not far from the shore; and they said: —

“It is some belated fisherman going home.”

They were mistaken. In that boat were hidden inquisitive neighbors, spies, who, overjoyed to have caught a glimpse of them, went off in hot haste to tell the story of their shameful expedition with innumerable false details.

It was one evening in the month of November that Gaston became acquainted with the distressing truth. Long continued, heavy rain had swollen the Rhône, and the Gardon was giving way; that was evident from the color of the water; people were afraid of an inundation.

To attempt to swim across that vast, turbulent torrent would have been to defy God. So Gaston de Clameran had betaken himself to Tarascon, intending to cross the bridge there, and go up the right bank of the river to La Verberie. Valentine expected him about eleven o'clock.

By a most extraordinary fatality, he dined that day with one of his friends at the Hôtel des Trois-Em-pereurs, whereas, he generally dined at Tarascon with a kinsman who lived on the corner of Place de la Charité. After dinner they went, not to Café Simon,

which was their customary place of resort, but to a small café on the fair ground.

The public room of that establishment, which was quite small, was full of young men of the town when they entered. The billiard table not being in use, Gaston and his friend ordered a bottle of beer, and began to play billiards. They were in the middle of their game, when Gaston's attention was attracted by forced shouts of laughter from a card table at the end of the room.

Thereafter, his thoughts being distracted by this laughter, which very evidently was induced by some malevolent purpose, Gaston knocked the balls about at random. His preoccupation became so perceptible that his friend, greatly surprised, said to him:

"In God's name, what's the matter? You're not paying any attention to the game; you keep missing caroms that are all made for you."

"Nothing's the matter."

The game continued another minute or two, but suddenly Gaston turned whiter than his shirt, dashed his cue on the table, and darted toward the other end of the room.

There were five young men seated at a table, playing dominoes as they emptied a bowl of hot wine. The one who seemed the oldest of the five, a handsome youth of twenty-six, with great, flashing eyes and a black moustache proudly turned up at the ends, named Jules Lazet, was the one whom Gaston de Clameran addressed.

"Will you repeat," he said, in a voice that shook with wrath, "do you dare to repeat what you just said?"

"Who would hinder me?" retorted Lazet, in a most tranquil tone. "I said, and I repeat, that girls of

noble blood are no better than working-girls, and that the particle *de* does n't make virtue."

"You mentioned a name."

Lazet rose, as if he foresaw that his reply would exasperate young Clameran, and that he would be likely to proceed from words to acts.

"I did," he said with the most insolent of smiles; "I did mention the name of the pretty little fairy of La Verberie."

All the customers of the café, including two commercial travellers who were dining at a table near the billiard table, had risen and were standing around the disputants. From the insulting glances which were cast on him, from the murmurs—the hooting, rather—which had greeted him when he charged upon Lazet, Gaston should have realized, and did in fact realize, that he was surrounded by enemies. The gratuitous affronts, the unceasing mockery of the old marquis had borne their fruit. Animosity ferments quickly and violently in Provençal hearts and heads.

But Gaston de Clameran was not the man to fall back a step, though he had had a hundred or a thousand enemies in front of him instead of fifteen or twenty.

"No one but a coward," he retorted, in a vibrating voice which the silence rendered almost solemn, "no one but a vile coward would be guilty of the infamy and villany of insulting, slandering a young woman whose mother is a widow and who has neither father nor brother to defend her honor."

"If she has neither father nor brother," sneered Lazet, "she has her lovers, and that's enough."

Those terrible words—"her lovers"—aroused Gaston's fury, hitherto restrained with great diffi-

culty, to the highest pitch; he raised his arm, and his hand fell with a dull thud on Lazet's cheek.

There was but one cry in the café, a cry of alarm. Everybody knew the violence of Lazet's temper, his herculean strength, his blind courage. With one bound he sprang across the table which stood between him and Gaston and seized him by the throat. There was a moment of horrible confusion. Clameran's friend tried to go to his assistance, but he was surrounded, beaten down with billiard cues, trampled upon, and kicked under a table.

Gaston and Lazet, equally strong, young and active, fought without marked advantage on either side. Lazet, a worthy fellow, and as fair-minded as he was brave, would have no intervention. The testimony on this point is unanimous. He did not cease calling to his friends:—

“Back, stand back, let me take care of myself!”

But they were too excited to remain simple spectators of the battle. “A sheet!” cried one of them; “bring a sheet quick, and let's toss the marquis!”

At the same moment five or six young men threw themselves on Gaston, separating him from Lazet, and drove him back to the billiard table. Some tried to throw him down, others to secure his legs with a strap. He defended himself with the energy of desperation, deriving from the consciousness that he was in the right a strength of which no one would ever have deemed him capable. And, while defending himself frantically, he heaped insults on his opponents, calling them cowards, miserable thugs, to attack a brave man twelve to one.

He was skirting the billiard table, trying to reach the door, and drawing gradually nearer to it, when the room echoed with a joyful shout.

"Here's the sheet!" was the cry.

"Put the little fairy's lover into the sheet!"

These cries Gaston divined rather than heard. He fancied himself conquered, in the hands of those villains, undergoing the most shameful of insults. With a sidelong spring of terrific force he shook himself free from three of those who held him; a violent blow with his fist relieved him of a fourth. His arms were free, but the whole body of his foes returned to the charge.

Thereupon he lost his head. He seized a knife from the table beside him at which the two commercial travellers had dined, and plunged it twice into the breast of the first man who rushed upon him.

The unlucky wretch was Jules Lazet. He fell.

There was a brief interval of stupefaction. Four or five of the assailants ran to Lazet to assist him. The mistress of the café uttered piercing shrieks. Some of the youngest ran into the street, crying "Murder!" But all the rest, still at least ten in number, rushed upon Gaston with cries of death.

He felt that he was lost; his enemies turned everything into weapons, and he had received three or four wounds, when he formed a desperate resolution. He mounted the billiard table, and, with tremendous impetus, jumped through the front windows of the café. The frames were solid, but he shattered them; the splinters of glass and wood gashed and wounded him in twenty places, but he passed through.

Gaston de Clameran was out of doors, but he was not saved. His adversaries, surprised at first and almost disconcerted by his audacity, soon recovered from their stupefaction and started in pursuit.

He ran across the fair ground, uncertain what direction to take. The weather was bad, the ground

soaked with rain, heavy black clouds were scudding across the sky before the west wind, but some stars were visible.

As he ran from tree to tree, constantly dodging, momentarily on the point of being surrounded and taken, Gaston deliberated as to the best course for him to pursue. At last he decided to reach Clameran if he could. So he ceased his dodging and ran with incredible speed diagonally across the fair ground in the direction of the levee, the *levade* as it is called in the province, which protects the valley of the Tarascon from inundation.

Unluckily, when he reached that levee, which is one of the most delightful promenades in Provence, being lined with great trees, Gaston forgot that there was at the entrance one of those stiles with three steps which are commonly placed at the end of paths intended for pedestrians only. As he was running at full speed he collided with it and was thrown backward, receiving a severe blow on the hip. He rose quickly, but the others were upon him.

This time he could expect no mercy. The infuriated men who were pursuing him uttered that ill-omened cry which woke the echoes of the valley more than once in the evil days: "Into the Rhône, into the Rhône with the *marquis*!" His reason had deserted him and he no longer knew what he was doing. A piece of a broken bottle had wounded his forehead, and the blood which flowed abundantly from the wound trickled into his eyes and blinded him. He must break away from them or die.

The ill-fated youth had kept the bloody knife in his hand; he struck out with it; another man fell, with a horrible groan.

This second blow gave him a moment's respite,

fleeing as the lightning flash, but sufficient to enable him to run around the stile and along the levee. Two of his pursuers were kneeling by the wounded man; five resumed the chase with greater ardor than ever. But Gaston was light of foot, and the horror of the situation increased his energy threefold; excited by the conflict, he ceased to feel any of his wounds and ran as swiftly as a race-horse, his elbows close to his body, and sparing his breath.

He soon distanced those who were pursuing him; the noise of their panting died away, that of their footsteps became less distinct; at last he could hear nothing at all.

However, he ran on for more than a fourth of a league; he had taken to the fields, leaping hedges and ditches; and not until he was fully convinced that it was impossible to overtake him did he drop at the foot of a tree.

This whole shocking scene had taken place with inconceivable rapidity. Between the moment when Gaston entered the little café with his friend and the present moment, not more than forty minutes had elapsed. But how much had happened in that short time! That single evening was destined to have more influence upon his life than all the twenty-five years he had lived.

He had entered that accursed establishment with his head erect, and his heart full of joy, happy to be alive, with no fears for the future; he came forth a lost man—for he had taken human life! He had taken life, and he still held in a convulsive grasp the instrument of murder; he threw it away with a gesture of horror. And then he strove to look the circumstances fairly in the face; as if it mattered to a man who lies crushed at the bottom of

the abyss, what stone, by slipping beneath his foot, caused his fall.

Ah! if only he alone were ruined! But no! Valentine was ruined too; her good name was gone forever. And it was he who, because he could not master his temper, had torn in shreds the honor which had been intrusted to him and which was dearer to him than his own!

However, he could not remain lying there. There was no doubt that the authorities had been notified. They would be in search of him already. They were on his track. They would certainly go to the château of Clameran, on the chance of finding him; and before going away, perhaps forever, he was determined to see his father, he was determined to embrace Valentine once more.

He rose—not without difficulty, for the reaction had come, and his nerves and muscles, strained beyond endurance, had given way; the sweat of the conflict and of his long run lay icy cold on his trembling body. He had pains everywhere, but particularly in the head and one shoulder. The wound on his forehead was hardly bleeding, but the blood had stiffened about his eyes and he was scarcely able to open them.

When, after a horribly painful journey, he rang at the gate of the château, it was after ten o'clock. At sight of him the old servant who opened the gate recoiled in alarm.

“Great God! monsieur le comte, what has happened to you?”

“Hush!” said Gaston, in the curt, hoarse voice due to the consciousness of imminent danger, “hush! Where is my father?”

“Monsieur le marquis is in his bedroom with Monsieur Louis; monsieur le marquis had an attack

of the gout a little while ago and he can't move; but you, monsieur —"

Gaston was no longer listening. He had run swiftly up the main staircase and entered the room where his father and brother were playing backgammon. His appearance made such an impression on the old marquis that he dropped the dice-box he held. And, in truth, that impression was easily understood. Gaston's face and hands and clothes were covered with blood.

"What's the matter?" demanded the marquis.

"The matter is, father, that I have come to embrace you for the last time, and to ask you for the means of leaving the country, of going abroad."

"You mean to leave the country?"

"I must, father, and now, instantly; I am pursued; the gendarmes are on my track and may be here at any moment. I have killed two men."

The shock dealt the marquis was so violent that he forgot his gout and tried to stand up. But the pain forced him back into his chair.

"Where? when?" he asked, in a shockingly altered voice.

"In a café at Tarascon an hour ago; there were fifteen of them and I was alone, so I seized a knife!"

"Still the refinements of '93," muttered the marquis. "Had they insulted you, count?"

"They insulted a young woman of noble birth in my presence."

"And you punished the rascals? *Jarnibleu!* you did well. When was a gentleman ever known to allow clodhoppers to fail in respect to a person of quality in his presence? But who was it whom you defended?"

"Mademoiselle Valentine de la Verberie."

"Oho!" said the marquis, "Oho! that old witch's daughter! *Jarnitonnerre!* Those La Verberies, deuce take them! have always brought us ill-luck!"

He unquestionably detested the countess, but in his mind respect for noble blood spoke louder than resentment. So he added:—

"No matter, count; you did your duty."

Among the servants of the château, curiosity soon became stronger than fear of the master, and Saint-Jean, the marquis's old valet, ventured to open the door of the bedroom, step in, and inquire:—

"Did monsieur le comte ring?"

"No, you knave, no," replied M. de Clameran. "I did n't ring, and you know it perfectly well. But, since you are here, so much the better. Some linen quickly, and clothes! Bring everything here that monsieur le comte needs to dress his wounds and change his clothes throughout."

The order was executed in an instant.

Gaston was not so seriously injured as he thought. With the exception of a knife-thrust a little below the left shoulder, his wounds were slight. After he had received the attention which his condition required, he felt like another man, ready to defy new dangers; renewed energy gleamed in his eyes.

At a sign from the marquis the servants withdrew.

"And now," he asked Gaston, "you think that you should go abroad, do you?"

"Yes, father."

"My brother should not hesitate," observed Louis. "If he remains he will be arrested, put in prison, taken before the Assize Court, and—who knows?—"

"I know only too well," grumbled the marquis, "he will be convicted. Such are the benefits conferred by the *immortal Revolution*, as they call it.

Ah! if we were back in my youthful days, we would take our arms, all three of us, mount our horses, march on Tarascon, and then — Whereas to-day we must run away!”

“And there’s not a moment to lose,” suggested Louis.

“True,” replied the marquis; “but, in order to run away, to go abroad, he must have money, and I have none to give him, here on the spot.”

“Father!”

“No, I have none! Ah! what an extravagant old fool I am! an improvident old baby! I have n’t as much as a hundred louis here!”

At his bidding Louis opened the secretary. The drawer used as a strong-box contained nine hundred and twenty francs in gold.

“Nine hundred and twenty francs!” cried the marquis; “that’s not enough. The oldest son of our family cannot fly with such a paltry sum as that; he cannot —”

Evidently at his wits’ end, the old marquis sat for a moment lost in thought. At last, making up his mind, he bade Louis bring him a little iron casket that stood on the lower shelf of the secretary.

The marquis wore the key of the casket around his neck, suspended by a black ribbon. He opened it, not without profound emotion, which his children noticed, and slowly took from it a necklace, a cross, divers rings, and other jewels. His face had taken on a most solemn expression.

“Gaston, my beloved son,” he said, “your life at this crisis may depend upon a suitable reward given opportunely to the man who will consent to assist you.”

“I am young, father, I have courage —”

"Listen to me. These jewels which I have here belonged to the marchioness your mother, a noble and saintly woman, Gaston, who watches over us on high. These jewels have never left me. In my days of destitution, during the emigration, when I gave lessons on the harpsichord in London to keep myself alive, I religiously preserved them. It has never occurred to me to sell them; even to pawn them would have seemed like sacrilege to me. But now — take these jewels, my son, and sell them; they are worth some twenty thousand francs —"

"No, father, no!"

"Take them, my son. If your mother were still in this world, she would say as I do. I order you to take them. It must not be that the safety, the honor of the eldest son of the house of Clameran is endangered for want of a little money."

Gaston, deeply moved, with tears in his eyes, had fallen at the old marquis's feet; he took his hand and put it to his lips.

"Thanks, father, thanks!" he whispered. "In the presumptuous insolence of my youth I have sometimes ventured to judge you harshly; I did not know you; forgive me! I accept — yes, I accept these jewels that my mother wore; but I take them as a trust confided to my honor, for which I shall answer to you some day."

Emotion overcame the Marquis de Clameran and Gaston; they forgot where they were. But Louis' heart was not of those which are touched by such spectacles.

"Time flies," he interposed; "we must hurry."

"He says truly!" cried the marquis; "go, count, go, my son, and may God protect the heir of the Clamerans!"

Gaston rose slowly from his knees.

"Before I go, father," he began, "I have a sacred duty to perform. I have not told you the whole story. The young woman whose defence I took upon myself to-night — Valentine, I mean — is the woman I love, and —"

"Oh!" ejaculated M. de Clameran, in utter amazement; "oh! oh!"

"And I beg you, father, I implore you on my knees, to ask Madame de la Verberie to give me her daughter's hand. Valentine, I know, will not hesitate to share my exile; she will join me wherever I go —"

Gaston paused, alarmed by the effect his words had produced. The old marquis had turned red, or rather purple, as if he were on the point of being stricken with apoplexy.

"Why, this is monstrous!" he exclaimed, stuttering with wrath; "it is rank madness!"

"I love her, father. I have sworn that I would have no other wife but her."

"Then you'll die a bachelor!"

"I will marry her!" cried Gaston, gradually working himself up; "I will marry her because I have promised to do it, and our honor is involved."

"Fiddlesticks!"

"Mademoiselle de la Verberie shall be my wife, I tell you, because it is too late to take back my word; because, even if I no longer loved her, I would marry her none the less, because she has given herself to me, because in a word, you understand, what those fellows said at the café to-night is true, Valentine is my mistress!"

The heir of the Clamerans had calculated on the effect of this avowal, which circumstances extorted

from him; he was mistaken. The marquis, exasperated as he was, felt relieved of an enormous weight. Malicious delight gleamed in his eyes.

"Aha!" said he, "so she's your mistress. *Jar-nibleu!* I'm delighted to hear it. My congratulations, count; they say she's a very agreeable little creature."

"Monsieur," said Gaston, in an almost threatening tone, "you forget; I told you that I love her. I have pledged my word."

"Ta! ta! ta!" cried the marquis; "your scruples seem very strange to me. Is n't it true that one of her ancestors led one of our ancestresses astray? Now we are quits. Ah! so she is your mistress—"

"By my mother's memory and by our name I swear that she shall be my wife!"

"Indeed!" cried the marquis, growing warm; "so you dare to assume this tone, do you? Never—do you understand?—never shall you have my consent! You know whether the honor of our house is dear to me, eh? Well, I would prefer to see you arrested, tried, convicted, I would prefer to know that you were at the galleys, rather than see you that little strumpet's husband!"

This last phrase drove Gaston wild.

"Let your will be done, then, father," he said. "I will remain; they may arrest me and do with me as they choose; it matters little to me! I care nothing for a life without hope. Take back these jewels; they are of no use to me now."

A terrible scene would certainly have ensued between father and son, had not the door of the bedroom at that moment been thrown open with a great noise. All the servants of the château were crowded together in the hall.

"The gendarmes!" they said, "here are the gendarmes!"

At these words the old marquis rose and succeeded in remaining on his feet. So many emotions had shaken him in the last hour that the gout yielded.

"Gendarmes!" he cried, "in my house, at Clam-eran! We will make them pay dear for their insolence! Will you fellows help me?"

"Yes! yes!" replied the servants, "down with the gendarmes!"

Luckily, at that moment, when everybody else seemed to lose his head, Louis retained all his self-possession.

"To resist would be madness," he observed; "we might perhaps drive the gendarmes back to-night, but to-morrow they will return in greater numbers."

"True," said the old marquis, bitterly; "Louis is right. As they say nowadays, the law must always assert itself. They were preaching that as long ago as '93. Should not I know that the gendarmes are omnipotent? Why, when I am hunting, some of them have the presumption to come and ask me, me, a Clam-eran, for my license to carry arms!"

"Where are they?" queried Louis.

"At the gate," replied La Verduze, one of the grooms. "Does not monsieur le vicomte hear the horrible noise they are making with their sabres?"

"Then Gaston must make his escape by the gate of the kitchen garden."

"Watched! monsieur," exclaimed La Verduze, in great distress, "and the small gate into the park too. There's a whole regiment of them. Why, some of them are on sentry-go along the park wall!"

It was only too true. The news of Lazet's death, having become known immediately, had turned Ta-

rascon topsy-turvy. Not only had the gendarmes been ordered out on horseback to arrest the murderer, but they were reinforced by a squad of hussars. At least a score of the young men of the town acted as guides to the armed force.

"So we are surrounded!" said the marquis, recovering all his presence of mind in the hour of danger.

"Not a chance of escape is left," groaned Saint-Jean.

"We will see whether that is so, *jarnibleu!*" cried M. de Clameran. "Ah! we are not the strongest, you say. Very good! then we will be the shrewdest. Attention, all! Do you, Louis, my son, go down to the stables with La Verdure; you will each mount one of the best horses and lead another, and post yourselves with as little noise as possible—you, Louis, at the gate leading into the park, and you, La Verdure, at the main gate. You others will go each to one of the gates, and be ready to throw them open. When I give the signal by firing a pistol, let all the gates be opened at once; then Louis and La Verdure will let their led horses go and do their utmost to ride out and draw the gendarmes after them."

"I will undertake to give them a good chase," exclaimed La Verdure.

"Wait. Meanwhile the count, with Saint-Jean's assistance, will climb the park wall and go up the river as far as Pilorel the fisherman's hut. He's an old sailor of the Republic, a fine fellow who is devoted to us; he will take the count in his boat, and when they are once on the Rhône they will have only God to fear! You understand? Off with you."

Left alone with his son, the old marquis slipped into a silk purse the jewels which Gaston had re-

placed on the table; and, opening his arms, he said, in a voice which he strove hard to keep from trembling: —

“Come, my son, come and let me give you my blessing.”

For more than a minute, father and son, both deeply moved, were clasped in each other's arms.

But the clamor at the gate redoubled and reached their ears distinctly.

“Come!” said M. de Clameran.

And taking a pair of small pistols from a stand of arms, he handed them to the count, turning his head away and whispering: —

“They must not take you alive, Gaston.”

Unfortunately, Gaston, on leaving his father, did not go downstairs at once. He was more than ever anxious to see Valentine, and he believed that there was a possibility of being able to say adieu to her in person for the last time. He said to himself that Pilorel could stop a moment at the park of La Verberie. So, from the few moments' respite accorded him by destiny, he took one minute to go up to his bedroom and show at the window the light which told his mistress that he was coming. He did more; he waited for a reply.

“Pray, come, monsieur le comte,” said Saint-Jean, utterly unable to understand his conduct; “come, in Heaven's name! you are throwing yourself away!”

At last he ran down the stairs. He was still in the vestibule when the report of a pistol — the old marquis's signal — rang out.

Instantly, and almost simultaneously, he heard the noise made by the main gate as it was opened, the clashing of the gendarmes' and hussars' sabres, the wild gallop of several horses, and on all sides, in the

park and in the main courtyard, loud yells and terrific oaths.

Leaning out of his bedroom window, with perspiration rolling down his face, the Marquis de Clameran awaited, so agitated that he could hardly breathe, the result of this game in which the stake was his oldest son's life.

His plan was an excellent one. As he had foreseen, Louis and La Verduce succeeded in forcing their way out, and rode at full speed across the country, one to the right, the other to the left, each drawing a dozen horsemen after him. Being much better mounted, they were likely to give their pursuers an extensive view of the neighborhood. Gaston was as good as saved, when fatality — was it fatality alone? — took a hand in the game.

About a hundred yards from the château, Louis' horse stumbled and fell, pinning his rider beneath him. Being instantly surrounded by gendarmes and volunteers on foot, M. de Clameran's second son was recognized.

"This is n't the murderer!" cried one of the young men of the town; "let's hurry back; they are trying to fool us!"

Back they went, and just in time to see, by the wavering light of the moon, which emerged from the clouds for a moment, Gaston climbing the wall of the kitchen garden.

"There's our man!" said the brigadier of gendarmes; "open your eyes, you fellows, and forward, at a gallop!"

Giving their horses the rein, they rushed toward the spot where they had seen Gaston jump down.

On wooded, or simply irregular ground, it is easy enough for a man on foot, if he is a swift runner and

retains his presence of mind, to elude a number of mounted men. Now, the ground in that part of the park was most favorable to young Clameran. He was in a large field of madder, and every one knows that the cultivation of that valuable root, which has to remain in the ground three years, necessitates furrows sixty to seventy centimetres in depth. Not only could the horses not gallop, they could hardly keep on their feet. This circumstance brought those gendarmes who were careful of their beasts to a standstill. Four hussars alone took the risk. But their efforts were of no avail. Leaping from furrow to furrow, Gaston soon reached an enormous tract as yet hardly cleared, and studded with very young chestnuts.

The pursuit was the more interesting, inasmuch as the fugitive evidently had a chance of escape. So that all the horsemen became intensely excited over it, cheering one another on, shouting to one another when Gaston left one clump of trees to run to another.

As for himself, being thoroughly familiar with the country, he did not despair. He knew that after the chestnuts he would come to fields of thistles, and he remembered that the two were separated by a broad and deep ditch. It occurred to him that if he jumped into the ditch he would be completely hidden, and that he could leave it farther down while they were still hunting for him among the trees. But he did not think of the overflow of the river. When he reached the ditch he found that it was full of water.

Disconcerted, but not discouraged, he was taking a start to jump across, when he saw three mounted men on the other side. They were gendarmes, who had ridden around the madder field and the chest-

nuts, thinking that they would regain the advantage on the level surface of the fields of thistles.

At sight of them Gaston stopped short. It seemed easy enough to deceive them by a false jump, but would he not be caught in the fields, at the end of which he could see Pilorel the ferryman's hut?

To retrace his steps was to give himself up to the hussars. He knew that on his right, a short distance away, was a small wood, but he heard the hoof-beats of several horses on the road between him and that wood. In that direction too he was taken.

Lastly, at his left he had the river, tremendously swollen, almost over its banks, — the foaming, seething muddy Rhône, rushing on with an ominous roar.

What should he do? He felt that the circle of which he was the centre was gradually narrowing about him. Must he, then, have recourse to the pistol, and there, in the open fields, hunted by gendarmes like a wild beast, blow out his brains? What a death for a Clameran!

No. He said to himself that there was still one remaining chance of safety, a feeble, paltry, miserable, desperate chance, it is true, but still a chance. He still had the river.

He ran swiftly to the shore, still holding his pistols cocked in his hands, and took his stand on the extreme end of a little promontory which extended fully ten feet into the river. This cape of refuge was formed by a fallen tree-trunk, along which débris of many kinds, sticks and bunches of straw, borne along by the water, had lodged. The tree sank and quivered and cracked woefully under Gaston's weight. From it he could plainly distinguish all those who were pursuing him, hussars and gendarmes; there

were twelve or fifteen of them, some at his right and some at his left; and they shouted with delight.

"Surrender!" cried the brigadier of gendarmes.

Gaston did not reply. He was weighing, calculating his chances of escape. He was well above the park of La Verberie; could he land there, assuming that he was not dragged under and drowned at the outset? He reflected that at that very moment Valentine was wandering by the river on the other side, frantic with anxiety, waiting and praying.

"Once more," cried the brigadier, "will you surrender?"

The poor fellow did not hear. The solemn voice of the torrent, roaring and eddying about him, deafened him. He was passing through that supreme moment when man, standing on the brink of eternity, sees his whole past life and judges himself, in an instant more fleeting than the lightning flash.

Calm, although death was at his feet, Gaston looked about for the best spot to jump, and commended his soul to God.

"We might as well put an end to this," said the gendarmes; "he'll stay there till we go and get him, so let's dismount."

But Gaston had finished his prayer.

With a powerful gesture he threw his pistols toward the gendarmes; he was ready. Having found a solid spot to stand upon, he made the sign of the Cross and plunged into the Rhône head first, with his hands clasped in front of him. The violence of his spring detached the last roots of the tree; it hung a moment, turned upon itself, and started down stream.

Horror and pity, rather than vexation extorted an exclamation from all the horsemen.

"He is lost!" muttered one of the gendarmes; "it's

all up with him; a man can't fight against the Rhône; they'll find his body at Arles to-morrow."

The hussars seemed especially distressed at the death of that comely and nobly born youth, whom they had been pursuing so fiercely a moment before. They admired his courage and his determination, and his resignation as well; for, having resolved to die and being armed, he might have defended himself and sold his life dearly. Genuine French soldiers, they were all on the side of the conquered now, and there was not one of them who would not have been ready to do anything to save him and assist him to escape.

"Wretched business!" grumbled the old sergeant who commanded the hussars.

"Damnation!" said the brigadier, who was a philosopher; "as well the Rhône as the Assize Court! Half-wheel, you fellows. What troubles me is the idea of that poor old man waiting to hear about his son. Let who will, tell him the truth; I won't undertake it!"

XIII

VALENTINE knew that Gaston was to go to Tarascon that evening, to cross the Rhône by the wire bridge between Tarascon and Beaucaire, and she expected him from that direction at the hour agreed upon the night before, eleven o'clock. But some time before that hour, happening to glance toward Clameran, she thought that she could see lights moving about from room to room in an altogether unusual fashion,

A sinister presentiment froze all the blood in her veins, checking the pulsations of her heart. A secret but commanding voice within told her that something extraordinary and terrible was taking place at the château of Clameran. What? She could not imagine; but she was sure of the fact; she would have sworn that some great misfortune was about to happen.

With her eyes obstinately fixed upon that huge black pile in the distance, she watched the going and coming of the lights in the great rooms, with whose relative position she was familiar, as if she hoped to draw some inference therefrom. She even opened her window and listened, as if with the thought that some significant sound might reach her ear. Alas! she heard only the low, muffled roar of the river.

Her anxiety increased, was becoming more poignant and more intense from moment to moment, when suddenly she saw at Gaston's window the dear signal, so familiar to her, which announced that her lover was about to cross the Rhône. She could not believe her eyes, she insisted on doubting the evidence of her senses, and not until the signal had been repeated three times, did she answer it. Then, more dead than alive, feeling as if her legs would give way under her, she went down into the park, clinging to the walls, and at last reached the river bank.

Great God! it seemed to her that she had never seen the Rhône in such a frenzy. Was it possible that Gaston would try to cross it? There was no longer any possible question that something horrible had happened.

She had fallen on her knees, and with her head extended toward the river, her hair drenched with icy perspiration, she strove to pierce the darkness, she

questioned the pitiless waves which perhaps carried away her lover's corpse. Every black object which she descried in the torrent seemed to her to be Gaston's body. At times she fancied that she heard a terrible shriek above the roaring of the waves, the agonizing shriek of the drowning man, the last outcry of the sentient being, overthrown and crushed by the blind elements.

But no, she did not see Gaston's body. While the hussars and gendarmes returned sadly to the château of Clameran, Gaston performed one of those prodigious feats of which we should be tempted to doubt the possibility were they not attested by irrefragable evidence. At first, when he plunged, he was rolled over and over five or six times, and dragged down toward the bottom. In a river that has overflowed its banks, the current is not of equal force at all depths, and therein lies the very great danger. But that danger Gaston realized and had anticipated. Instead of wasting his strength in a hopeless struggle, he let himself go, thinking only of economizing his breath. Not until he was some twenty yards from the spot where he had jumped, did he return to the surface with a vigorous effort.

Close beside him, the tree trunk upon which he had been standing a moment before was shooting down stream with the swiftness of an arrow. For a few seconds, he was entangled amid the débris of all sorts, but a stronger current set him free.

He did not think of reaching the opposite bank. He said to himself that he would land where he could. Retaining his presence of mind as fully as if he were surrounded by the ordinary conditions of existence, he exerted all his strength and skill to deflect gradually from a straight course, remaining, however, in

the main current, for he knew that it would be all over with him if the current should take him cross-wise.

That redoubtable current is no less capricious than powerful; hence the curious effects of inundations. According to the windings of the stream, it veers sometimes to the right, then to the left, sparing one bank, despoiling the other.

Gaston, who had a very intimate acquaintance with his river, knew that there was a sharp turn a little below Clameran, and he relied upon the eddy at that turn to send him toward La Verberie. His anticipations were realized. An oblique current bore him swiftly toward the right bank, and if he had not been on his guard, he would have been dragged under and drowned.

But the cross current did not go as far as Gaston thought, and he was still a considerable distance from the shore when he passed the park of La Verberie like a shot from a gun. He had time, however, to catch a glimpse of something like a white shadow under the trees; Valentine was waiting for him. He was much lower down when, having gradually drawn near the shore, he tried to gain a foothold. Feeling the ground under his feet, he tried twice to stand up, and twice the force of the current threw him down.

He was on the point of being swept away, when he succeeded in grasping the branch of a willow, by the aid of which he pulled himself out upon the bank. He was saved.

Instantly, without taking time to breathe, he rushed in the direction of La Verberie and was soon in the park. It was time that he arrived. Overwhelmed by the intensity of her apprehension, the unfortunate Valentine was crouching on the ground, feeling as if

her life were ebbing away. Gaston's embrace roused her from her stupor.

"You!" she cried, in a voice vibrating with all the frenzy of her passion, "you! So God has taken pity on us? he has heard my prayers?"

"No," he murmured, "no, Valentine, God has had no pity on us."

Her presentiments had not deceived her; she realized it from Gaston's tone.

"What fresh misfortune has happened?" she cried. "Why have you come here in this way, risking your life, which belongs to me? What is going on?"

"Valentine, our secret is ours no longer; our love is at this moment the laughing-stock of the province."

She recoiled as if struck by lightning, hiding her face in her hands, and uttering a long moan.

"It is so," continued Gaston, forgetting everything in the sensations of the present moment. "This is the fate which the blind animosity of our families has brought upon us. Our noble and sacred love is of the sort of which men boast in broad daylight, in the face of God and man, but we are forced to hide, shamefully, miserably, — to hide in order to love, as carefully as to commit some crime!"

"Everything is known," faltered Valentine; "everything is known!"

Amid the fury of the elements, Gaston had retained his *sang-froid*, but at the sound of that beloved voice he became excited even to delirium.

"And I could not," he cried, "I could not crush the infamous villains who dared to utter your adored name. Ah! why did I kill only two of the wretches —"

"You have killed somebody! — Gaston!"

Valentine's tone of profound horror restored a glimmer of reason to her lover.

"Yes," he replied, struggling to control himself; "yes, I struck — That is why I crossed the Rhône. The honor of my name was at stake. Only a moment ago all the gendarmes in the province were hunting me like a venomous beast. I have escaped them, and now I am hiding, I am running away."

Valentine must have had uncommon strength of character not to succumb beneath so many unexpected blows.

"Where do you hope to go?" she asked.

"Indeed, I have no idea! Where am I going, what will become of me, what future is in store for me? How can I tell? I am a fugitive; I am going to do my utmost to reach some foreign land, to take a false name and a disguise. And I shall go on and on, until I find one of those lawless countries which afford shelter to murderers."

Gaston paused and waited, hoping for a reply. As no reply was forthcoming, he continued with extraordinary vehemence: —

"My reason for determining to see you once more, Valentine, before I disappear, was that, when everything else failed me, I relied upon you; I had faith in your love. A bond unites us, my beloved, stronger and more indissoluble than all earthly bonds. I love you. In God's sight, you are my wife. I am yours as you are mine, for life. Will you allow me to fly alone, Valentine? To the sorrows of exile, to my painful regrets for my wasted life, will you add the tortures of separation?"

"Gaston, I implore you —"

"Ah, I knew it," he exclaimed, misunderstanding her exclamation; "I knew that I should not fly alone.

I knew your heart well enough to be sure that you would claim half of the burden of my miseries. This moment effaces everything. Let us go! Having our joint happiness to defend, I am no longer afraid. I can defy everything, conquer everything. Come, O my Valentine, we will die or escape together. The future which we have seen in our dreams is just beginning, a future of love and liberty!"

He was mad, he was delirious; he had put his arm around Valentine's waist, he was carrying her away. Gaston's excitement increased, and he lost all idea of moderation, but Valentine succeeded in overcoming her emotion. Gently, but with an energy of which he had no suspicion, she extricated herself from his embrace and pushed him away.

"What you ask," she said, in the saddest and yet the firmest of tones, "what you hope for is impossible."

This calm resistance, utterly inexplicable to him, seemed to confound Gaston.

"Impossible!" he stammered.

"You know me well enough," Valentine continued, "to know that to share with you the most wretched of destinies would be to me the height of human felicity. But above your voice and the voice of my heart, which draw me on, there is a more powerful and more imperative voice which forbids me to follow you,—it is the sublime voice of duty."

"What! you can think of such a thing as staying here after the horrible scene of this evening, after a scandal which will be public property to-morrow?"

"What do you mean? That I am ruined, dishonored? Am I more so to-day than I was yesterday? Do you imagine that the sarcasm or contempt of the world will make me suffer as keenly as the

constant rebellion of my conscience? I have always judged my own conduct, Gaston, and if your presence, the sound of your voice, the touch of your hand upon mine, have made me forget everything else, away from you I have remembered my duty and wept."

Gaston listened in utter stupefaction; it seemed to him that a new Valentine was standing before him, and that he was discovering new depths in her soul, whose secrets he thought that he knew so perfectly.

"And your mother?" he muttered.

"It is the thought of her, don't you see, that binds me to this place. Would you have me, an unnatural daughter, desert her to follow my lover, at the moment when she is poor, alone and friendless, and has nobody but me?"

"But she will be told, Valentine; we have enemies. She will hear the whole story."

"What if she does! Conscience speaks, and that is enough. Ah! if only I could, at the cost of my life, spare her the pang of learning that her daughter, her Valentine, has disregarded all the laws of honor! It may be that she will be hard, cruel, pitiless to me. Even so, do I not deserve it? O my only friend, we have been asleep and dreaming a dream that was too sweet to last. I expected this ghastly awakening. Wretched, imprudent, mad creatures that we were to believe that there is any enduring happiness outside the path of duty! Sooner or later stolen joys must be paid for. Let us bend our heads and humble ourselves."

This cool reasoning, this sorrowful resignation rekindled Gaston's wrath.

"Do not talk so!" he cried. "Can you not realize that the bare thought of humiliation for you drives me mad?"

"Alas! I must expect many worse insults."

"Insults! What do you mean?"

"I mean, Gaston —"

She checked herself, hesitated a moment, and finally said: —

"Nothing; it's nothing. I am foolish."

Had he been less engrossed by their critical situation, Gaston would have detected some new misfortune behind Valentine's reticence; but he clung to his idea.

"All hope is not lost," he continued. "My love and my despair touched my father, I think; he is naturally kind-hearted. It may be that my letters, when I am out of danger, and the entreaties of my brother Louis will persuade him to ask Madame de la Verberie for your hand in my name."

This suggestion seemed to terrify Valentine.

"Heaven forbid that the marquis should ever take that step!" she cried.

"Why so?"

"Because my mother would reject his request; because my mother — I must avow it in this extremity — has sworn that I shall marry a man with an enormous fortune, and your father is not rich."

"Oh!" said Gaston, in disgust. "And you sacrifice me to such a mother!"

"She is my mother, and that is enough. I have no right to judge her. It is my duty to remain, and I shall remain."

Valentine's tone denoted a resolution that was not to be shaken, and Gaston realized that all his entreaties would be fruitless.

"Ah!" he cried, wringing his hands in despair, "you have never loved me!"

"You are wicked to say that! You do not think it!"

"No," he continued, "you don't love me, for, at this moment, when we are about to part, you have the ghastly courage to reason coolly and to calculate. Ah! that is not the way I love you. Outside of you what is the whole world to me? To lose you is to die. Let the Rhône take the life which it miraculously preserved and which is now a burden to me."

He had already started toward the river, with his mind made up to die; Valentine detained him.

"So this is what you call love?"

Gaston was absolutely discouraged, crushed.

"What is the use of living?" he muttered; "what is there left for me now?"

"God is left, Gaston, who holds our future in his hands."

The slenderest plank seems salvation to the shipwrecked man; the single word *future* lightened Gaston's gloom with a ray of hope.

"You command," he cried with suddenly renewed animation, "and I obey. Enough of weakness. Yes, I propose to live, and to struggle on and triumph! Madame de la Verberie must have wealth, you say? Very good! in three years I shall have made a fortune or I shall be dead."

Valentine, with clasped hands, thanked Heaven for this sudden determination, for which she had not dared to hope.

"But before I go," continued Gaston, "I desire to place in your hands a sacred deposit."

He took from his pocket the silk purse containing the Marquise de Clameran's jewels and placed it in his friend's hands.

"These are my poor mother's jewels," he said; "you alone are worthy to wear them; in my thoughts I always intended them for you."

And as she hesitated and drew back, he insisted: —

“Take them as a pledge of my return. If I do not come to claim them within three years, it will mean that I am dead, and in that case you will keep them as a souvenir of the man who loved you so dearly.”

She burst into tears, she accepted.

“Now,” continued Gaston, “I have one last request to make of you. Everybody believes me to be dead, and that is what assures my safety. But I cannot leave my old father to the despair the thought will cause him. Promise me that you will go yourself tomorrow morning to tell him that I am safe.”

“I will go, I swear it,” she replied.

Gaston’s mind was made up; he felt that he must make the most of that moment of courage, and he leaned toward Valentine to kiss her for the last time. Gently, with a melancholy gesture, she pushed him away.

“Where do you intend to go?” she asked.

“I am going to try and reach Marseille, where a friend will conceal me and find me a ship on which to take passage.”

“You cannot go like this; you must have a companion, a guide, and I will provide you with one in whom you can have the blindest confidence, — our neighbor Père Menoul, who was master of a boat on the Rhône for a long while.”

They left the park by the small gate, to which Gaston had the key, and soon reached the old boatman’s house. He was asleep in his chimney-corner, sitting in his white wood arm-chair. When he saw Valentine enter with M. de Clameran, he sprang to his feet and rubbed his eyes, thinking that he was dreaming.

“Père Menoul,” said Valentine, “monsieur le

comte here is obliged to keep out of sight; he would like to get to the sea and take passage for some foreign country, secretly. Can you take him as far as the mouth of the Rhône in your boat?"

The good man shook his head.

"With the water in such a state," he said, "and at night, it is hardly possible."

"You will be doing *me* a very great service, Père Menoul."

"You, Mademoiselle Valentine! in that case it's all right; we will start at once."

Not until that moment did he venture to call Gaston's attention to the fact that his clothes were drenched and mud-stained and his head bare.

"I will lend you some of my dead son's clothes," he said; "it will be a disguise at all events; come this way with me."

Soon Père Menoul and Gaston, the latter well-nigh unrecognizable, reappeared, and Valentine went with them to the shore, to the place where the boat was moored.

For the last time, while the good man was arranging his mast, the lovers kissed, exchanging their very souls in that supreme farewell.

"In three years!" cried Gaston; "in three years!"

"Adieu, ma'm'selle," said the old skipper, "and you, my young gentleman, look out for yourself."

Whereupon, with a vigorous push with his oar, he shoved the boat into the centre of the current.

Three days later, thanks to Père Menoul's zeal, Gaston was concealed in the hold of the American barque "Tom Jones," Captain Warth, which weighed anchor for Valparaiso on the following day.

XIV

STANDING upon the shore, colder and whiter than a statue, Valentine looked after the frail receding craft which bore away the man she loved. It glided along at the will of the current, swift as the bird whirled away by the tempest, and in a few seconds was a mere black speck, barely visible in the mist that hovered over the river.

Gaston was saved, he had gone away; so Valentine could without fear give vent to her despair. It was useless, thenceforth, to restrain the sobs which suffocated her. Her noble courage of a moment before gave way to deathly prostration. She felt utterly crushed, shattered, as if something within her had given way, as if that little boat, now vanished, had carried away the best part of herself, her heart and her mind.

For while Gaston retained a ray of hope at the bottom of his heart, she had absolutely no hope. Overborne by the facts of her situation, she realized that it was all over. And upon questioning the future she was seized with shuddering terror.

However, she must return home. Slowly she walked back to the château, passing through the small gate which had opened mysteriously for Gaston so many times; and, as she closed it, it seemed to her that she raised an insuperable barrier between herself and happiness.

Before going up to her room, Valentine was careful to make the circuit of the château and look at her mother's windows. They were lighted, as was usual at that hour, for Madame de la Verberie passed part of the night in reading, and rose very late in the

morning. Taking refuge in the torpor of material comfort, which is far from expensive in the country, the selfish countess in no wise disturbed herself about her daughter. Seeing no danger to her in their isolation, she left her absolutely at liberty, and Valentine could go and come, could walk in the park at any hour of the day or night, so to speak, without any sign of displeasure on her mother's part.

But Valentine was afraid of being seen on this particular night. She would have been asked to explain the shocking disorder of her toilet, and why her dress was all wet and splashed with mud. Luckily, she was able to reach her room without hindrance, and lock herself in. She longed for solitude, she wanted to think, she felt the necessity of bracing herself to meet the terrible blows about to be dealt her.

Seated before her little work-table, she took from her pocket the silk purse Gaston had given her, and mechanically examined the jewels it contained. It would certainly have been a great joy to her to put one of the rings, the smallest and simplest, on her finger, but could she do it? Would not her mother ask her where she got it? And then she must lie again. Once more she kissed the purse, a reminder of the absent one; and she concealed the precious deposit in one of the drawers of her bureau.

Thereupon she remembered that she had to go to Clameran to reassure the old marquis, and inform him that his son had been miraculously saved and was still alive. When he had called upon his sweetheart for this last service, Gaston, blinded by passion, had not reflected on the obstacles she would encounter, on the dangers she must incur. Valentine saw and appreciated them only too well. But she had promised. It did not occur to her to break her promise

or to seek some pretext for not keeping it to the letter.

The day broke; she rose and dressed. Soon after, when the morning *Angelus* rang out on the bell of the village church, she said to herself that it was time to start, and she went downstairs.

The servants of the château had long been astir. One of them, named Mihonne, who was specially assigned to Valentine's service, was scrubbing the tiled floor of the vestibule with sand.

"If my mother asks for me," said the girl, "tell her that I have gone to early mass."

She often went to church at that hour, so she had nothing to fear on that account. Mihonne made no remark.

The great difficulty was to return before the breakfast hour. She had to walk more than a league to the nearest bridge, and as much more from the bridge to Clameran; in all nearly five leagues. And so, when she left La Verberie, she walked as rapidly as possible. The consciousness that she was doing an extraordinary thing, anxiety, and the feverish excitement of defying a recognized danger gave her wings. She did not think of weariness, she forgot that she had passed the night weeping. However, despite her efforts, it was past eight o'clock when she reached the long avenue of medlars which leads from the road to the great gate of the château of Clameran.

She was about to turn into it, when she saw, a few steps in front of her, Saint-Jean, the marquis's valet, whom she knew well. She stopped to wait for him, and he, when he saw her, quickened his pace. His face was drawn and haggard, his eyes were red; he had evidently been weeping. To Valentine's great surprise, he did not remove his cap when he ap-

proached her, and his tone was as rude as possible when he said: —

“Are you going to the château, mademoiselle?”

“Yes.”

“If you are going to see M. Gaston,” rejoined the servant, emphasizing his malicious words, “you have taken useless trouble. Monsieur le comte is dead, mademoiselle, dead because of a certain mistress he had.”

Valentine turned pale under the insult, but did not reply to it. As for Saint-Jean, who expected to crush her, he was stupefied and indignant at her coolness.

“I am going to the château,” said the girl, “to speak to monsieur le marquis.”

Saint-Jean emitted something like a sob.

“In that case, it’s not worth your while to go any farther.”

“Why not?”

“Because the Marquis de Clameran died at five o’clock this morning, mademoiselle.”

Valentine, in order not to fall, was obliged to lean against the tree by which she was standing.

“Dead!” she faltered.

“Yes,” replied Saint-Jean, with a withering glance, “yes, dead.”

A typical retainer of the old régime, Saint-Jean had all the passions of his masters, all their weaknesses, their friendships, their hatreds. He held the La Verberies in utter loathing, and, to cap the climax, he looked upon Valentine as the cause of the death of the marquis, whom he had served for forty years, Gaston, whom he adored.

“It was last night,” he continued, exerting himself to make every word a knife-thrust, “that monsieur le comte died. When they came to tell monsieur le

marquis that his oldest son was no more, he was struck down as if by lightning, although he was as strong and healthy as an oak. I was there. He threw up his hands and fell backward without a sound. We put him on his bed while M. Louis took a horse and rode to Tarascon for a doctor. But the blow was struck. When M. Raget arrived there was nothing to be done. At daybreak, however, monsieur le marquis came to himself and asked to be left alone with Monsieur Louis. A little while after that he breathed his last. His last words were: 'Father and son the same day! there'll be rejoicing at La Verberie.'"

With a word Valentine could have allayed the faithful servant's great sorrow; she had only to tell him that Gaston was alive, but she made the mistake of yielding to the fear that her indiscretion might have fatal consequences.

"Well," she rejoined, "then I must speak to Monsieur Louis."

This remark seemed to drive Saint-Jean to frenzy.

"You!" he cried, "you! Why, you can't think of such a thing, Mademoiselle de la Verberie! What! after all that has happened, you would dare to show yourself before him! I won't allow it, do you understand? And look you, if I were to give you any advice it would be to go home at once. I won't answer for the servants' tongues if they should see you."

And he strode away without awaiting a reply.

What could Valentine do? Crushed, humiliated, dragging herself along with difficulty, she went back over the road she had passed over so swiftly just before. At that hour many farmers were returning from the town; they had heard of the events of the night, and everywhere, as she passed, the unhappy

girl was greeted with ironical salutations and the most insulting smiles.

When she arrived at La Verberie, she found Mikhonne watching for her.

"Oh! mademoiselle," she cried, "pray hurry. Madame has had a visitor this morning, and ever since she has been calling for you with all her might. Come, but take care of yourself, for madame is in a frightful state.

People talk much and frequently of the patriarchal manners of our ancestors. It may be that there were such things as patriarchal manners a long time ago. One thing is certain, however, and that is that with our grandmothers the mind was much more alert, the hand more ready, and speech freer than with our wives, God be praised! and that the earlier generation did not recoil from an energetic gesture nor from a plain word.

Madame de la Verberie had clung to these ways of the good old times when women swore as freely as a carter whose cart is mired. Which is equivalent to saying that, as soon as Valentine appeared in her presence, she overwhelmed her with the most vulgar and violent epithets.

The countess had been informed of the scenes of the preceding night, exaggerated and arranged to suit public malignity, by an old dowager, her intimate friend, who had made her toilet very early in the morning expressly to come and serve up this poisoned dish with an abundance of condolences. In this shocking affair Madame de la Verberie had been much less impressed by her daughter's loss of reputation than by the destruction of her own plans, plans of marriage, ambition, and wealth. A young woman so seriously compromised would not readily find a

husband. It was absolutely necessary to allow at least two years to pass, after this adventure, before presenting her in society.

"You miserable creature!" cried the countess with frantic vehemence, flushing redder than a poppy; "so this is the way you respect the noble traditions of our family. Never before was there any need to keep watch on a La Verberie; they have always been able to maintain their honor, unaided. It was reserved for you to abuse your liberty so far as to descend to the level of the shameless creatures who are the disgrace of their sex."

Valentine had anticipated this horrible scene, she had awaited it with a fearful sinking of the heart. She submitted to it as a just and well-deserved chastisement of a guilty passion. Acknowledging that her mother's indignation was legitimate, she bowed her head like the repentant culprit before his judges. But this silence was just what was most likely to exasperate the countess.

"Will you answer me?" she said, with a threatening gesture.

"What answer can I make, mother?"

"You can say, wretched girl, that the people lie who say that a La Verberie has failed in her duty. Come, defend yourself, speak!"

Valentine sadly shook her head, but made no reply.

"It is true, then!" cried the countess, beside herself with rage; "it is true, then!"

"Forgive me, mother," faltered the girl; "forgive me!"

"What's that? forgive you! So I am not misinformed! Forgive you! that means that you confess, you shameless creature! God in heaven! what blood

flows in your veins? In Heaven's name, don't you know that there are sins which you should deny even when the evidence is notorious? And you are my daughter! Can't you see that there are confessions so degrading that no human power should be able to extort them from a woman? But no, she has lovers, and she confesses it without blushing. Why don't you glory in it? — that will be still more novel!"

"Ah! you have no pity, mother!"

"Have you had any pity for me, child? Has it ever occurred to you that your shame might kill me? Ah! I don't doubt that you and your lover together have laughed at my blind confidence. I had faith in you as in myself; I believed you to be as chaste and pure as in the days when I watched beside your cradle. I thought — and yet men mention your name with sneers in wine shops, after drinking, and then fight and kill one another on your account! I placed the honor of our name in your hands; what have you done with it? You have betrayed it to the first comer."

That was too much. The words "first comer" offended Valentine's pride. She did not deserve, no, she could not deserve such treatment. She tried to protest.

"I am mistaken," retorted the countess; "you are right — your lover was not even the first comer. Of all men you selected the heir of our hereditary enemies, Gaston de Clameran. Of all men on earth, he was the one you must have! — a dastard who went about in public boasting of your favors; a vile wretch who took his revênge for the heroism of our ancestors upon you and me, a woman and a child."

"No, mother, no, that is false; he loved me, and if he could have hoped for your consent —"

"He would have married you, eh? No, never! I

would rather see you roll into the gutter, little by little, than know that you were the wife of such a man."

Thus did the countess's hate find expression in the same thought as the Marquis de Clameran's anger.

"However," she continued, with the ferocity of which a woman alone is capable, "however, your lover is drowned, and the old marquis is dead, so I am told. God is just; we are revenged.

Saint-Jean's words, that "there would be rejoicing at La Verberie," at once recurred to Valentine's mind; detestable joy gleamed in the countess's eyes. That was the finishing stroke for the unfortunate girl. For half an hour past she had been making superhuman efforts to endure these cruel assaults, but her strength fell short of her energetic will. She became paler, if that were possible, closed her eyes, put out her arms as if in search of something to lean upon, and fell heavily, striking the corner of a cabinet, which made a deep wound in her forehead.

The countess's eyes were dry when she saw her daughter stretched out at her feet. Her vanity was bleeding at every pore, and maternal love did not stir within her. Hers was one of those hearts which wrath and hatred fill so full that no tender feeling can find room therein.

Seeing that Valentine did not move, she rang, and the servants of the château, who stood in the vestibule trembling at the echoes of that dreaded voice, ran to obey the summons.

"Take mademoiselle to her room," she said to them; "lock her in, and bring me the key."

The countess was determined to keep Valentine a prisoner, and prevent her from going out for a long while to come. She had a frantic fear of public

opinion. She knew the malevolence — must we say the unconscious and ingenuous malevolence? — of the country, where the mind, having nothing to occupy it, lives for whole months on the same piece of gossip. The country will never have the same consideration, the same delicacy with respect to some faults, that the city has. Woe to the poor girl who is caught tripping there! She must either flee or drain to the dregs the cup of premeditated humiliation and brutal sarcasm. People contend for the honor of throwing the first stone.

But Madame de la Verberie's reasoning was bad. The deafening but swift explosion of a scandal is far preferable to the continuous, dull rumbling of evil-speaking.

All the countess's plans, however, were destined to be defeated. Her women soon returned and told her that Valentine had recovered consciousness, but that she seemed to them very ill. She began by saying that it was mere "malingering;" but, as Mihonne insisted, she resigned herself to the necessity of going up to her daughter's room, and there she was fain to bow to the evidence of her eyesight; Valentine was in danger. She allowed no sign of apprehension to appear on her face, but sent to Tarascon for Doctor Raget, then the oracle of the province — the same man who had been sent for to attend the Marquis de Clameran during the night.

Doctor Raget was one of those men whose memory lives long after them. Possessed of a noble heart and a great intellect, he had given his life to his profession. As he was well-to-do, he never asked a fee for his visits. Night and day, in all weathers, one would meet his old cabriolet drawn by a gray mare, the box under the seat always filled with beef tea and

wine for the poor. He was at this time a man of more than fifty years of age, short and bald, with a bright eye and a clever mouth; merry, talkative, albeit with a slight lisp, and affable and kind-hearted to excess.

The messenger had the good fortune to find him, and brought him back.

When he looked at Valentine, Doctor Raget frowned. Being endowed with very great perspicacity, sharpened by practice, he scrutinized Valentine and her mother alternately, bestowing such piercing glances on the old lady that her assurance wavered, and she felt the blood rising in her wrinkled cheeks.

"This child is very ill!" he declared at last.

And, as Madame de la Verberie did not reply, he added: —

"I desire to be alone with her a few moments."

Doctor Raget was too formidable a personage, by reason of his professional reputation and his character, for the countess to venture to refuse. She left the room, not without visible repugnance, and went into the next room to wait, apparently calm, but in reality disturbed by the gloomiest thoughts.

It was quite half an hour — a century! — before the doctor reappeared. Although he had witnessed much suffering, comforted many sorrows, he seemed deeply moved.

"Well?" queried the countess.

"You are a mother, madame," he replied sadly; "that is to say, your heart contains treasures of indulgence and forgiveness, does it not? Summon all your courage. Mademoiselle Valentine is *enceinte*."

"The wretched girl! I had guessed as much!"

There was such a terrible expression in the countess's eye that the doctor was impressed by it. He placed his hand on the old lady's arm, and, glaring at

her until he fairly made her shudder, he said, emphasizing each word: —

“And the child must come to no harm!”

The doctor's penetration had not led him astray. In very truth an abominable thought had passed through Madame de la Verberie's mind, — the thought that that child, the living witness of Valentine's sin, might be suppressed. Feeling that she was detected, that harsh and haughty woman lowered her eyes before the old doctor's persistent gaze.

“I don't understand you, doctor,” she muttered.

“But I understand myself, madame la comtesse; I simply meant to say that a crime does n't wipe out a misstep.”

“Doctor!”

“I say what I think, madame. If I am mistaken, so much the better for you. At this moment Mademoiselle Valentine's condition is serious, but not dangerous. A too violent emotion has shaken her youthful constitution and she has a sharp attack of fever, which we shall speedily control, I trust.”

The countess realized so thoroughly that the old doctor's suspicions had not vanished that she resorted to a show of emotion.

“At least, doctor,” she said, “you assure me that there is no danger?”

“None at all, madame,” M. Raget replied, with a shade of irony in his tone; “your maternal affection may be quite at ease on that score. What the poor child needs first of all is the mental repose which you alone can afford her. A few gentle, kindly words from you will do more and do it better than all my prescriptions. But, understand, the slightest shock, the slightest mental excitement, would have deplorable results.”

"It is true," said the countess, hypocritically, "that when I first learned that my beloved Valentine was the victim of a cowardly seducer, I could not control my wrath."

"But the first moment has passed, madame; you are a mother, you are a Christian, you know what remains for you to do. It is my duty to save your daughter and her child, and I will save them. I will come again to-morrow."

Madame de la Verberie could not let the doctor go thus. She detained him with a gesture, and without reflecting that she was betraying herself, that she was making a confession, she cried:—

"What! monsieur, do you presume to interfere with my doing everything in the world to keep secret the horrible misfortune that has come upon me? Must our shame become public property? Do you propose to condemn us to be the jest and laughing-stock of the whole country?"

The doctor made no reply for a moment; he was reflecting; the situation was a serious one.

"No, madame," he said at last. "I could not prevent your leaving La Verberie,—that would be going beyond my rights. But it is my duty to require you to answer to me for the child. You are free, but you will have to furnish me with proofs that the child is alive, or, at all events, that no harm has been done to it."

With these threatening words he went out; and it was high time, for the countess was suffocating with rage and self-restraint.

"The insolent hound!" she cried; "the impertinent cur! To dare to preach like that to a woman of my rank! Ah! if I were not at his mercy!"

But she was, and she realized that she must now

bid adieu to her chimeras for good and all. No more hope of a luxurious life, of a millionaire son-in-law, of wealth for her declining years, or carriages, magnificent dresses, and card-parties where the stakes were high. Thus she would die as she had lived, poor, hard-working, doomed to a mediocrity that was the more heart-sickening because she no longer had the prospect of a happier future to help her to endure it.

And it was Valentine who had reduced her to this extremity. At that thought she felt one of those hates which never forgive, which time intensifies instead of allaying, spring to life within her as against her daughter. She longed for her death as well as that of the accursed child. But the doctor's piercing glance was too vividly present to her memory for her to think of any overt act. Indeed, when she at last made up her mind to go up to her daughter's room, she forced herself to smile, to say a few affectionate words, then left her in charge of the devoted Mihonne.

Poor Valentine! She had been so cruelly stricken that she seemed to feel the springs of life drying up within her. However, her suffering grew gradually less. Great crises, physical or mental, are always succeeded by profound torpor, which is almost free from pain. When she had strength to reflect she said to herself: —

"It is all over, my mother knows all; I have nothing more to fear from her anger; I can only hope and wait for forgiveness."

That was the secret which Valentine had determined not to reveal to Gaston, realizing that, if he knew it, he would never consent to go away without her. But, she was determined that he should fly, and at the same time the voice of duty bade her re-

main. And even now she was not sorry that she had remained. Her most cruel anxiety was due to the thought of Gaston. Had he or had he not succeeded in obtaining passage from Marseille? How was she to find out? After two days the doctor allowed her to leave her bed, but she could not think of going out, of walking as far as Père Menoul's hut.

Luckily, the old skipper was as shrewd as genuine attachment can make a man. Hearing that the young lady at the château was very ill, he thought of nothing but the best means of reassuring her as to the fugitive's fate. He invented several pretexts for going to La Verberie, and at last succeeded in seeing Valentine. They were not alone, but the good man with a single glance gave her to understand that Gaston was out of danger.

This certainty did more to hasten Valentine's convalescence than all the medicines in the world; and soon after, the doctor, who had called every day for six weeks, announced that the invalid was in a condition to endure the fatigue of travelling.

The countess had been awaiting that moment with indescribable impatience. She had already sold half of her *rentes*, in order that nothing need delay their departure; and she said to herself that with 25,000 francs, the proceeds of the sale, she could provide for all emergencies. For a fortnight she went about, repeating everywhere that, as soon as her daughter was better, she should go to England, where she had a kinsman who was very old and whose wealth surpassed his age.

To this journey Valentine looked forward with unmixed alarm, and she shuddered when her mother said to her, immediately after the doctor's announcement: —

"We will start day after to-morrow."

Day after to-morrow! And Valentine had found no way of letting Louis de Clameran know that his brother was not dead. In this extremity she did not hesitate to confide in Mihonne, and gave her a letter for Louis. But the faithful servant had a fruitless walk. The château of Clameran was deserted, all the servants had been dismissed, and M. Louis, who was now called the marquis, had left the province.

At last they started. Madame de la Verberie, feeling sure of Mihonne, decided to take her along, but not until she had made her swear eternal secrecy on the Gospel, during mass, at the moment of the elevation of the Host.

It was in a small village near London that the countess took up her abode with her daughter and her servant, under the name of Madame Wilson. Her reason for selecting England was that she had lived there for a long time, that she was familiar with the temper and customs of the people, and that she spoke the language like a native. She had even preserved some relations with the English aristocracy, and she frequently went out in the evening, to dinner or to the theatre, taking on these occasions the most humiliating precautions with regard to Valentine, whom she always locked in her room.

In that dismal and solitary house Valentine de la Verberie brought a son into the world one night in the month of May.

He was presented to the clergyman of the parish, and entered on the register under the name of Valentine-Raoul Wilson. The countess had anticipated and prearranged everything. In the outskirts of the village, after much searching, she had discovered a worthy farmer's wife, who, in consideration of

500 pounds sterling, consented to take charge of the child, promising to bring him up like one of her own children, to have him taught a trade, and even to push him on in the world if he behaved well.

Little Raoul, therefore, was turned over to her a few hours after his birth. This woman did not know the countess's real name; she was led to believe and did believe that she was dealing with an Englishwoman. It was more than probable, therefore, it was certain that the child, when he became a man, would never succeed in discovering the secret of his birth.

When she recovered consciousness Valentine asked for her child. In her breast maternal love quivered and awoke, that sublime maternal love of which God has planted the seed in every woman's heart. At this crisis the hard-hearted countess was truly pitiless.

"Your child!" she cried; "upon my word, I don't know what you mean; you are dreaming, I fancy, or else you are mad!"

And as Valentine insisted, she replied: —

"Your child is in a safe place, and he will want for nothing. Let that satisfy you. You must forget what has happened, as one forgets a bad dream. The past must be as if it had never been. You understand me; I insist upon it."

The moment had come when Valentine should have resisted, within certain limits, the countess's constantly extending despotism. The thought came to her, but not the courage. If, on the one hand, the clear-sightedness of misery pointed out to her the perils of an almost culpable resignation — for, after all, she was a mother too! — on the other hand, she was crushed by the consciousness of her terrible sin. So she held her peace, thus abdicating her rights forever, delivering herself unarmed to the tender mercies

of a mother whom she strove not to judge, in order that she might not have to condemn her.

Such an abundance of suffering, of regrets, of inward combats was certain to retard and did in fact retard her recovery. Toward the end of the month of June, however, she was well enough to return to La Verberie with her mother.

On this occasion neighborly uncharitableness did not display its accustomed lucidity. The countess, who went everywhere, lamenting the fruitlessness of her journey, was able to satisfy herself that no one in the province had divined the reasons of her absence.

One man alone, Doctor Raget, knew the truth. But Madame de la Verberie, although she hated him with all her heart, did sufficient justice to his character to be sure that she had no reason to fear any indiscretion on his part. When she returned home, her first visit was to him. She caught him one morning as he was leaving the breakfast table, asked him for a moment's interview, and abruptly placed before him the official documents with which she had provided herself for his benefit.

"You see, monsieur," she said, "the child is alive, and a worthy woman has taken charge of him, in consideration of a round sum of money."

"It is well, madame," he replied, after closely scrutinizing the papers, "and if your conscience does n't reproach you, I, for my part, have nothing to say to you."

"My conscience does n't reproach me in the least, monsieur."

The old doctor shook his head, and fixing his eyes upon the countess in one of those profound glances which make the truth start to life in the inmost recesses of the soul, he rejoined: —

"Would you swear that you have not been cruel to the point of barbarity?"

She turned her eyes away and replied, assuming her most magnificent air:—

"I have acted as a woman of my station should act; and I am surprised, I confess, to find in you an advocate of misconduct."

"Ah, madame," cried the doctor, "you are the one from whom indulgence should come; what compassion can your unhappy child hope to receive from strangers, if you, her mother, have no compassion for her?"

The countess declined to listen any longer; that outspoken voice offended her pride, and she rose.

"Is that all you have to say to me, doctor?" she asked in a supercilious tone.

"All, yes, madame, and I have never had but a single thought, to save you from everlasting remorse."

Herein the noble-hearted, kindly doctor was mistaken; he could not realize that he had fallen in with an exceptional being. Madame de la Verberie was inaccessible to remorse. But that soul, insensible to everything save pleasure or the gratification of its vanity, was destined to suffer and did suffer cruelly.

She had resumed her former mode of life, but having lost a portion of her income, she could no longer succeed in making both ends meet. That was an inexhaustible text for recriminations, to which she incessantly sacrificed her daughter, at every meal, apropos of everything and of nothing. For, although she had declared that the past did not exist, she constantly reverted to it, as if to obtain therefrom fresh food for her wrath.

"Your misconduct has ruined us," she said on every occasion.

So that one day Valentine, exasperated beyond endurance, could not restrain the retort:—

“You would have forgiven me, I suppose, if it had made us rich!”

But such rebellious outbreaks on Valentine's part were rare, although her life was simply one long succession of tortures inflicted with infinite cunning. The very thought of Gaston, the elect of her heart, had become a source of suffering. It may be that, having discovered the uselessness of her courage and her devotion to what she deemed her duty, she was sorry that she had not gone with him. What had become of him? How was it that he had not invented some means of sending her a letter, a reminder, a word? Perhaps he was dead. Perhaps he had forgotten her. He had sworn that he would return rich within three years; would he ever return? And indeed was it possible for him to return? His disappearance had not been the end of that ghastly Tarascon business. He was supposed to have been drowned, but as there was no positive proof of his death, the law had been compelled to satisfy outraged public opinion. The case had been carried to the Assize Court, and Gaston de Clameran had been sentenced, by default, to several years' imprisonment.

As for Louis de Clameran, no one knew just what had become of him. Some people said that he was living in Paris and leading a wild life there.

Being informed of these last-mentioned circumstances by her faithful Mihonne, Valentine began to despair. To no purpose did she scan the lowering future; not a gleam lightened the gloomy horizon of her life. All the springs that move the mind and the will were shattered within her, and she had at last reached the state of passive resignation characteristic

of persons who are constantly maltreated, — the heedlessness, the self-abnegation which indicate a premeditated sacrifice of life.

And the days passed, and four years had elapsed since the fatal night when Gaston had abandoned himself to the current of the Rhône in Père Menoul's boat.

These four years Madame de la Verberie had employed as badly as possible. Seeing that it was quite impossible for her to live on her income, and being too foolishly proud to sell her estates, which were so badly managed that they did not return two per cent, she had resigned herself to the necessity of borrowing, and consuming principal and income together.

Now, as the first step on this road is the only one that costs, the countess had made rapid progress. Saying to herself, "After me, the deluge!" the countess, like the late Marquis de Clameran, thought of nothing but her own comfort. She received a great deal, indulged in frequent expeditions to the neighboring cities, Nîmes and Avignon; she ordered superb dresses from Paris and gave a free rein to her taste for good cheer. All that she had so long awaited from the munificence of a love-lorn son-in-law she bestowed upon herself. Great sorrows demand consolation!

In the first year after her return from London, she did not hesitate to gratify her desire for an equipage, and bought a cast-off horse, which did not look at all badly, on my word! when harnessed in a calèche, — a very presentable vehicle, bought at second-hand and on credit at Beaucaire. When her mind was disturbed by anxious thoughts she would excuse herself to herself, saying, "I am so unhappy!"

But, unfortunately, this semblance of luxury was ex-

pensive, very expensive. After selling the rest of her *rentes*, the countess borrowed, first on the estate of La Verberie, then on the château itself. And in less than four years she had reached a point where she owed more than forty thousand francs and could not pay the interest on her debt.

She was beginning to wonder which way she should turn; the phantom of expropriation stood by her bed at night; but chance deigned to come to her aid.

For about a month a young engineer, in charge of certain contemplated improvements along the Rhône, had made the village adjoining La Verberie his centre of operations. As he was young and clever and very well-favored, he had been welcomed with open arms by the society of the neighborhood, and the countess frequently met him at the houses to which she went for her game of cards in the evening.

This young engineer was named André Fauvel. Having noticed Valentine, he watched her closely, and by slow degrees fell in love with this young woman with the great melancholy blue eyes and reserved bearing, who bloomed resplendent, in that gallery of veterans, like a rose-bush in flower in a winter landscape. Even before he had ever spoken to her he loved her.

He was comparatively rich; a magnificent career lay open before him; he felt that he possessed the initiative faculty which makes millionaires; and he was free. He vowed that Valentine should be his wife.

He chose an old friend of Madame de la Verberie, noble as a Montmorency and poorer than Job, as the first confidante of his matrimonial aspirations. With the precision of a former pupil of the École Polytechnique he enumerated all the advantages which would

make him a Phoenix among sons-in-law. The old lady listened to him a long while without interrupting him. But when he had finished she made no secret of the fact that his pretensions seemed to her extremely presumptuous. What! a fellow of no birth, a — Fauvel, a geometrician or surveyor by profession, presume to aspire to the hand of a La Verberie! With peculiar vehemence she insisted upon these considerations of a superior caste. Luckily, when that chapter was finished she descended to practical considerations.

“However,” she added, “it may be that you won’t be turned out-of-doors. The countess’s situation is one of the greatest embarrassment; she owes money to God and the saints, the dear woman; the bailiffs often visit her; so that — you understand — if a young man should come forward, animated by honorable intentions, and with a little property — why — I don’t know what might happen.”

André Fauvel was young, and the old lady’s insinuations seemed shocking to him. On reflection, however, when he had taken counsel, and, above all, when he had exerted himself to study the prevailing spirit of the nobility of the neighborhood, who were rich in prejudices only, he realized that pecuniary considerations alone would be sufficiently powerful to induce the high and mighty châtelaine of La Verberie to bestow her daughter’s hand upon him.

His hesitation vanishing with this certainty, he devoted all his attention to devising an adroit method of putting forward his candidacy. It was not that it seemed to him an easy matter. To go in quest of a wife money in hand was exceedingly offensive to his delicacy and overturned all his ideas. But he knew no one in the province in whom to confide, and his

love was great enough to cause him to submit to whatever was repugnant to him, with his eyes closed.

The opportunity he awaited to explain himself, in perfectly clear and transparent fashion at all events, if not categorically, presented itself unsought. As he entered a hotel at Beaucaire one evening, to dine, he saw Madame de la Verberie just sitting down. Blushing to his ears, he asked permission to sit beside her, a permission which was granted with a most encouraging smile.

Did the countess suspect the young engineer's love? Had she been warned by her friend? We are at liberty to suspect as much. At all events, without putting André to the trouble of feeling his way, from point to point, to the subject which lay so near his heart, she began with the soup to complain of the hard times, of the scarcity of money, and the greediness of capitalists for profit. The truth is that she had come to Beaucaire to negotiate a loan, that she had found all the strong-boxes padlocked, and that her notary had advised her to effect a private sale of her estates.

Anger, and that secret, instinctive comprehension of a situation, which is the sixth sense of women of all ages, loosening her tongue, she was more expansive with this young man, who was almost a stranger to her, than with her most intimate friends in her own social circle. She confided to him the horror of her situation, her embarrassment, her anxiety for the future, and, over and above all else, the grief which she felt because of her inability to find a husband for her dear daughter.

He listened to these endless lamentations with a suitably concerned expression, but inwardly he was delighted beyond words. And so, without allowing

the old lady to finish, he began to set forth what he called his way of looking at the situation. After expressing compassion for the countess, he declared that he could in no wise understand her anxiety. What! she was distressed by the thought that she had no dowry to give her daughter! Why, Mademoiselle Valentine was one of those young ladies whose noble birth and beauty are a most enviable contribution. For his part he knew more than one man who would esteem himself too fortunate if Mademoiselle Valentine would deign to accept his name, and who would make it his duty—a very grateful duty—to relieve her mother from all cause for anxiety.

And, after all, the countess's situation did not seem to him so hopeless as she chose to represent it. What would it require to set her free, to remove all incumbrances from the estate of La Verberie? Forty thousand francs, perhaps. Really, that was not worth mentioning. Moreover, it would not be a gift from the son-in-law, but an advance. For would not the estate and château of La Verberie revert to him sooner or later, increased in value by the constant rise in real estate? And that was not all. No man who loved Valentine would ever leave his wife's mother without the comforts suited to her years, her noble birth, and her misfortunes. He would hasten, therefore, to add to her inadequate income the means of procuring, not only the necessities, but the luxuries of life.

As André talked on, with an earnestness too emphatic to be feigned, it seemed to the countess that a celestial balm was falling upon all her financial sores. She fairly bloomed, her little yellow eyes cast glances softer than velvet, an alluring, friendly smile played

about her thin lips, ordinarily more tightly closed than the lid of a miser's money-box.

A single question disturbed the engineer.

"Does she understand me?" he thought; "does she take me seriously?"

Indeed she did; she saw through the transparent device of his generalizations, and her reflections proved it.

"Alas!" she said, not without a sigh, "La Verberie cannot be saved with forty thousand francs; including interest and costs, it would take full sixty thousand."

"Oh! forty or sixty, it makes no difference."

"And then would my son-in-law — that rare creature of our suppositions — understand the necessities of my existence?"

"He would consider it a favor, I imagine, to be allowed to add four thousand francs a year to the income of your estate."

The countess did not reply at once, she was reckoning.

"Four thousand francs," she said at last; "that would be hardly enough. Everything is outrageously dear in this region. But with six thousand francs! — oh! with six thousand francs —"

This seemed a little unreasonable to the young engineer; however, with the reckless generosity of a man in love, he replied: —

"The son-in-law of whom we speak would have very little love for Mademoiselle Valentine, if a wretched matter of two thousand francs deterred him."

"You will promise so much for him?" murmured the countess.

But suddenly an objection occurred to her mind.

"We must be sure," she observed, "that this son-

in-law we are supposing has sufficient property to carry out his agreements. I care too much for my daughter's happiness to give her to a man who did not offer me — what do you call it? — security, guaranties —”

“Upon my word!” thought Fauvel, a little ashamed of himself, “we are actually disputing over the terms of a bargain. — It is clear that your son-in-law would bind himself by the marriage contract,” he said aloud.

“Never, monsieur, never! Think of the proprieties! What would people say of me?”

“Allow me — it would be set forth that your allowance was the interest of a sum which he would acknowledge that he had received from you.”

“That would do very well.”

Madame de la Verberie insisted upon driving André home in her calèche that evening. Not a word, referring directly to the subject, was exchanged between them on the way; but they had understood each other, their minds were made up. They understood each other so well that, when she dropped the young engineer at his door, the countess gave him her lean hand — which he devotedly kissed, thinking of Valentine's lovely eyes — and invited him to dinner on the following day.

Not for years had Madame de la Verberie been so light-hearted, and her servants were overjoyed at her good-humor. She had passed abruptly from a desperate position to an almost brilliant one. And although she affected such proud sentiments, she perceived neither the degrading character of this bargain nor the infamy of her conduct.

“An allowance of six thousand francs!” she said to herself. “That young engineer is an honorable

man! And a thousand crowns from the estate; that makes nine thousand francs a year in all. He will live in Paris with my daughter, the dear children, and I can go to see them without great expense."

Great God! at that price she would have sold, not one daughter, but three, if she had had them.

But suddenly a thought passed through her mind which turned her cold. Would Valentine consent? So intense was her anxiety that, in order to solve her doubts instantly, she went up to her daughter's bedroom, where she found her reading by the light of a candle-end.

"My child," she said abruptly, "a young man who is satisfactory to me has asked me for your hand, and I have given it to him."

At this unexpected, stupefying announcement, Valentine sprang to her feet.

"It is not possible!" she stammered.

"Why not, if you please?"

"Did you tell him what I am, mother; did you confess—"

"Your past follies? God forbid! And you will be reasonable enough to imitate my silence, I trust."

Crushed as Valentine's will was by her mother's overbearing despotism, her honest nature rose in revolt.

"You are trying to test me, mother," she cried. "To marry a man without confessing everything to him would be the most cowardly and detestable treachery."

The countess had a terrible longing to lose her temper. But she realized that her threats would fall harmless upon a resistance encouraged by the conscience. So instead of commanding, she entreated.

"Poor child," she said, "poor dear Valentine, if

you knew the horror of our position you would not speak so. Your folly was the beginning of our ruin, which to-day is complete. Do you know where we stand? Our creditors threaten to turn me out of La Verberie. What will become of us then, my child? Must I, at my age, go from door to door asking alms? We are lost, and this marriage is salvation."

And after the entreaties came arguments. She had divers strange and subtle theories at her service, had the dear countess. That which she formerly called a shocking crime was now only a peccadillo. According to her, Valentine's situation was a common, every-day occurrence. She could have appreciated her daughter's scruples, she said, if there were reason to fear a disclosure of what had happened in the past. But such precautions had been taken that there was nothing to fear. Would she love her husband any the less? No. Would he be less happy? No. Then, why hesitate?

Bewildered, stricken by vertigo, Valentine asked herself if this were really her mother—formerly so haughty, deaf to argument whenever honor or duty was involved—who expressed herself thus, giving the lie in one moment to all that she had said during her life.

Alas! yes, it was really she. Poor Valentine did not know to what degrading compromises a conscience blinded by selfishness and greed can descend. She did not know what disgraceful capitulations poverty forces upon those who have not the courage to endure it with dignity.

The countess's subtle arguments and shameful sophistries could neither move her nor shake her convictions, but she had neither the strength nor the courage to resist the tears of that mother, who, see-

ing that her arguments were of no avail, threw herself at her feet, imploring her with clasped hands to save her. More deeply moved than she had ever been, torn by a multitude of conflicting feelings, afraid to refuse or to promise, fearful of the consequences of a decision thus extorted from her, the unhappy girl begged her mother to allow her at least a few hours of reflection.

This request Madame de la Verberie dared not refuse. Having dealt the blow, she said to herself that to insist would be imprudent.

"As you wish it," she said, "I will retire. Your heart will advise you better than your mind what choice to make between a useless confession and your mother's salvation."

And with that she left the room, angry but hopeful. She had only too many reasons for her hopefulness. Placed between two equally imperative, equally sacred, but absolutely irreconcilable duties, Valentine's bewildered mind could not decide where her duty lay. Should she reduce her mother to the most horrible destitution? Should she shamefully abuse an honest man's confidence and love? Whatever her decision, the result, so far as she was concerned, would be a ghastly life and horrible remorse.

Ah! if she had had beside her one of those charitable and infallible advisers whose stern words strengthen wavering resolutions! If she had had that discreet and gentle friend who had comforted her at the time of her first misfortunes — old Doctor Raget!

Formerly the memory of Gaston de Clameran would have spoken aloud and dictated her conduct, but that distant memory was now only a vague murmur. In novels, it is true, we meet heroines whose

constancy is equalled only by their virtue; but in real life there are few of these miracles. Gaston had long remained radiant and dazzling in Valentine's thoughts, like the heroes of dreams; but the mists of time had gradually obscured the beams of the idol, and there was nothing left now in her heart save a lifeless relic.

But when she rose in the morning, pale and ill from the suffering of a long sleepless night, she had almost determined to speak. When night came, however, when she found herself beside André Fauvel, under her mother's eye, threatening and imploring by turns, her courage failed her.

She still said to herself, "I will speak;" but she added, "I will do it to-morrow, some other day, later."

None of these inward struggles escaped the notice of the countess, but she was scarcely disturbed by them. Perhaps the old lady knew by experience that when one postpones the performance of a difficult and painful act, he is lost, it is never performed.

It may be that Valentine had an excuse in the horror of her situation. It may be that, without her knowledge, an unreasoning hope was springing up in her heart. A marriage, even an unhappy marriage, offered a prospect of change, of a new life, of some alleviation of her unendurable suffering. Sometimes, in her ignorance of life she said to herself that in time, with greater intimacy, the confession would come almost naturally, and that André would forgive her and would marry her all the same, since he loved her. For he did love her truly; it was impossible for her not to realize that. To be sure, it was not Gaston's impetuous passion, with its alarms, its excitements, its transports, but it was a tranquil, mature love, more deeply rooted perhaps than the other,

deriving a sort of contemplative quality from the consciousness of its legitimacy and its sincerity.

And Valentine gradually became accustomed to André's presence; she was greatly surprised at that strange feeling of happiness, the delicate attentions that were lavished upon her, the forethought that constantly anticipated her desires. She did not love André as yet, but separation would have been painful, cruel to her.

During the period of the young engineer's courtship, the old countess's conduct was a *chef-d'œuvre*. With the utmost sagacity, she had suddenly abandoned her entreaties; she no longer argued, but declared with tearful resignation that she had no desire to influence her daughter's decision. But she cried poverty, she groaned as if she were on the eve of being without bread; and she had taken steps to make sure that she would be harassed by the bailiffs. Levies and summonses rained down on La Verberie, and she showed all the papers to Valentine, saying: —

"God grant that we are not turned out of our ancestors' house before your wedding, my love!"

Furthermore, feeling sure that she had enough influence over her daughter to arrest a disclosure on her lips, she never left her alone with André for one minute.

"Once married," she thought, "they can look out for themselves."

And she urged forward the preparations for the wedding quite as zealously as André. She left Valentine no time to collect her thoughts, not a moment to reflect. She kept her occupied, and her mind overburdened and bewildered with innumerable details. There were dresses to buy, some article in the trousseau to be changed, visits to make. So that she

went on until the eve of the great day, panting with hope, oppressed with anxiety, like the gambler at the critical moment of a big game.

That evening for the first time Valentine was left alone with the man who was to be her husband. As the night came on, she took refuge in the salon, tortured by pangs of conscience, even sharper than usual. He entered. Seeing her in tears, in terrible distress, he gently took her hand, and asked her what the matter was.

"Am I not your best friend?" he said; "should not I be the confidant of your sorrows, if you have any? Why these tears, my love?"

At that moment she was on the point of confessing everything. But suddenly she thought of the scandal, of André's grief and her mother's wrath; she saw her whole life ruined, she said to herself that it was too late, and with an outburst of sobs she cried, as all girls do when the last moment is at hand: —

"I am afraid!"

And he, instantly reassured as to the cause of her distress, the vague dread, the horror of the unknown, the revolt of modesty, strove to comfort her, and was surprised to see that his kind words, instead of calming her, seemed to increase her trouble tenfold. But Madame de la Verberie hurried into the room; the contract was to be signed. It was decreed that André Fauvel should know nothing.

And on the following day — a lovely spring day — André Fauvel and Valentine de la Verberie were married at the village church.

Early in the morning the château was filled with the bride's friends of her own sex, who came, in accordance with custom, to preside over the last ceremonies of the toilet. She strove to remain calm, to

have a smile upon her lips; but she was whiter than her veil, and her heart was rent by horrible remorse. It seemed to her that people would read the truth in her face, and that that white dress was nought but a bitter sarcasm, a final humiliation.

She shuddered when her best friend approached to place the wreath of orange blossoms on her head. It seemed to her that the wreath would burn her. It did not burn her, but one of the wire stems, being only partially covered, made a slight scratch on her brow, which bled freely, and a drop of blood fell on her dress.

What an omen! Valentine was near fainting. But omens are deceitful; witness the fact that, a year after her marriage, Valentine was, so people said, the happiest of women.

Happy! — yes, she would have been happy if she could have forgotten. André adored her. He had started in business, and had succeeded. But he wished to be very rich, immensely rich, — not for himself, but for his beloved wife, whom he desired to surround with all the enjoyments of luxury. Deeming her the loveliest of women, he wished her to be the most richly endowed.

Eighteen months after her marriage Madame Fauvel bore a son. Alas! neither that child, nor a second one, which arrived a year later, could make her forget the other, the abandoned one, whom a stranger had taken, for a sum of money. While loving her sons passionately, and bringing them up like a prince's sons, she would say to herself: —

“Who knows if the other poor fellow has a crust of bread to eat?”

If she had known where he was, if she had dared! But she did not dare. Sometimes, indeed, she was

troubled at the thought of the deposit Gaston had left with her, of the Marquise de Clameran's jewels, as to which she was always afraid that they were not securely enough hidden.

Sometimes she said to herself: "Bah! misfortune has forgotten me!"

Poor woman! Misfortune is a visitor who sometimes keeps one waiting, but who always comes.

XV

LOUIS DE CLAMERAN, the marquis's second son, was one of those concentrated natures, which, under a cold or indifferent exterior, conceal a fiery disposition, unruly passions, and the most frantic greed. All sorts of extravagant ideas and evil impulses were at work in his diseased brain long before the events which decided the destinies of the family of Clameran. Apparently absorbed by vain pleasures, this precocious hypocrite longed for a more extensive stage for his passions, cursing the necessity which kept him in the country, imprisoned in that old château, which seemed to him gloomier than a prison and colder than a tomb.

He was bored to death. His life, wasted in the fields and the small towns of the neighborhood, seemed to him disgustingly and intolerably monotonous. The paternal fetters, mild as they were, wounded him like a harness too small for his body. He was thirsty for independence, excitement, money, pleasure, the unknown.

He did not love his father; he hated his brother Gaston with a frantic hatred.

The old marquis himself, in his blameworthy improvidence, had kindled this consuming envy in the heart of his second son. A close follower of the traditions which he declared to be the only worthy ones, he had said a hundred times that the oldest son of a noble family ought to inherit all its property, and that Gaston alone should have whatever fortune he might leave at his death.

The flagrant injustice of this unconcealed preference maddened the jealous Louis. Gaston had often told him that he would never consent to take advantage of their father's prejudices; that they would share everything like loyal brothers. But Louis was not touched by what, judging others by himself, he called an absurd display of false disinterestedness.

This hatred, which neither the marquis nor Gaston ever suspected, was betrayed by acts of sufficient significance to impress the servants. They were so well aware of it that, on the fatal evening when the fall of Louis' horse delivered Gaston to his pursuers, they refused to believe that it was an accident, and muttered under their breath the word "fratricide."

Indeed a most deplorable scene took place between Louis and Saint-Jean, to whom fifty years of faithful service gave a liberty which he sometimes abused, and his outspokenness was often rough and disagreeable.

"It is unfortunate," said the old retainer, "that such a skilful horseman as you are should have fallen just at the moment that your brother's safety depended on your way of handling your horse. La Verdure did not fall."

The insinuation dealt the young man such a home-thrust that he turned pale and cried in a threatening voice: —

"Villain! what do you mean?"

"You know what I mean, monsieur le vicomte," said Saint-Jean.

"No! — speak, explain yourself."

The servant replied only with a glance, but it was so cruelly significant that Louis rushed upon Saint-Jean with his hunting-crop uplifted, and would have beaten him but for the intervention of the other servants.

This scene took place when Gaston, in the fields of madder and young chestnuts, was trying to throw his pursuers off the scent. Ere long the hussars and gendarmes reappeared, deeply moved and distressed, with the news that Gaston de Clameran had jumped into the Rhône, and was drowned beyond all question.

A sorrowful murmur greeted this distressing announcement. Louis alone remained unmoved, not a muscle of his face quivered. Indeed there was a gleam in his eye, the gleam of triumph. A secret voice cried out within him: "Now you are assured of your father's fortune and the coronet of a marquis."

Thenceforth he was no longer the poor younger son, robbed for the benefit of the older; he was the sole heir of the Clamerans.

The brigadier of gendarmes had said: —

"I won't be the one to tell that poor old man that his son is drowned!"

Louis had neither the old soldier's scruples nor his grief. He went up without hesitation to his father's room and said to him in a firm voice: —

"My brother has chosen between life and honor — he is dead!"

Like the oak struck by lightning, the marquis, at these words, staggered and fell. The doctor who was sent for could only acknowledge, alas! the

powerlessness of science. Toward morning Louis, dry-eyed, received his father's last breath.

Henceforth Louis was the master. The unfair precautions taken by the marquis, to evade the law and assure his whole fortune to his first-born, without a contest, turned against him. By favor of the culpable complaisance of his notaries, and by means of trust deeds tainted with fraud, M. de Clameran had so arranged everything that, on the day after his death, Gaston could obtain possession of his whole heritage; but Louis obtained it, without even being required to produce proof of his brother's death.

He was Marquis de Clameran, he was free, he was wealthy too, comparatively speaking. He, who had never had twenty-five crowns in his pocket, found himself in possession of about two hundred thousand francs. This sudden, absolutely unhopd-for wealth turned his head so completely that he forgot his cunning dissimulation. His expression was noticed at the marquis's obsequies. With lowered head and his handkerchief at his mouth, he followed the coffin, borne by twelve peasants, but his glance gave the lie to his attitude; his face was radiant; one could divine a smile beneath the grimaces of his affected grief.

The vibration of the last shovelfuls of earth on the coffin had not ceased ere Louis was back at the château, selling all that he could sell: horses, carriages, harnesses. On the following day he discharged the servants, poor fellows who had looked forward to ending their days under the hospitable roof of Clameran. Several, with tears in their eyes, begged him to make some use of their services, even without pay, but he roughly dismissed them.

He was absorbed in calculations at that moment.

His father's notary, whom he had summoned, appeared. He gave him a power of attorney to sell all the estates, and received from him the sum of twenty-five thousand francs, his first loan.

And then, one night at the end of the week, he locked all the doors of the château, to which he swore that he would never return, and gave the keys to Saint-Jean, who, having a modest competence and a small house near Clameran, was to continue to live in the neighborhood.

Poor Saint-Jean! He had no suspicion that by denying Valentine access to Louis he had ruined a second time, so to speak, that Gaston whom he loved so dearly. When he received the keys, he ventured to make but one suggestion.

"Shall we not have a search made for your brother's body, monsieur le marquis?" he inquired in a heart-broken tone. "And if it is found what shall we do?"

"I will leave instructions with my notary," Louis replied.

And he hurried away as if the soil of Clameran burned his feet. He went to Tarascon, whither he had already sent his baggage, and where he was to take the coach that ran between Marseille and Paris. The railroad was not as yet open for traffic.

At last he started! The heavy diligence began to move and was soon rattling along behind six galloping horses and digging with each revolution of its wheels an abyss between the past and the future. Crouching in one corner of the coupé, Louis de Clameran smacked his lips in anticipation of the joys which he was soon to taste in reality. Paris rose in the purple haze at the end of the journey, as radiant as the sun, and as dazzling.

For he was going to Paris! Was it not the promised land, the city of marvellous things, where every Aladdin finds a lamp? There, all ambitions are realized, all dreams come true, all passions bloom and flourish; there, there is satisfaction for all longings; there, the days, which fly away like hours, are succeeded by nights of revelry. Every evening thirty orchestras exhaust themselves trying to tire out a hundred thousand indefatigable legs. In twenty theatres melodrama weeps or comedy smiles, while at the Opera the loveliest women in the world, gleaming with diamonds, swoon to the strains of divine music. Excitement, crowds, luxury, pleasure everywhere. What a dream! And Louis de Clameran's heart swelled with eager longing, and it seemed to him that the horses moved more slowly than tortoises.

He did not think of bestowing a regret or a memory on the past. What cared he for his father and his brother now? All the faculties of his mind were bent upon penetrating the mysteries of the future which awaited him yonder. Had he not all the chances on his side? He was young and handsome, he had an iron constitution, he bore a great name, and he was rich. He had twenty thousand francs in his pocket, and he could obtain ten times as much more. It seemed to him that his was one of those treasures of which one never sees the end.

And when he leaped from the diligence upon the muddy pavement of Paris, in the evening just as the gas was being lighted, it seemed to him that he was taking possession of the great city, that it was his, that he was able to buy it.

Louis de Clameran's illusions were those of every young man who, having never been brought face to

face with the imperious necessities of life, finds himself suddenly in possession of a small fortune. It is this ignorance of the real value of money which squanders patrimonies and gives wings to the old gold pieces laboriously hoarded in the thrifty province.

Filled with the conviction of his own importance, accustomed to the deference of the people in the neighborhood, the young marquis had said to himself, as he turned his back upon the country, that in Paris, by virtue of his name and of his fortune alike, he would be a distinguished personage.

The result was curiously at variance with his anticipations. To his great surprise, he discovered that he possessed none of those qualities which constitute individuality in large cities. He realized that in the midst of that indifferent, busy multitude, he was lost as it were, as unnoticed as a drop of water in a torrent. But the unflattering reality failed to discourage a young man who was determined to satisfy his passions at any cost.

His family name possessed but one privilege, most disastrous to his future; it threw open to him the doors of Faubourg Saint-Germain. There he became acquainted with a considerable number of men of his own age, all as nobly born as himself, whose income was equal to half if not the whole of his principal. Almost all of them admitted that they maintained their position only by prodigies of economy and shrewd management, and by regulating their vices and their dissipation as carefully as a bonnet-maker regulates his Sunday outings with his family.

These statements, and many others which surprised the new arrival beyond measure, did not open his eyes. He strove to copy the brilliant exterior of

these economically lavish young men, without thinking of copying their prudence. He learned to spend, but not to keep accounts like them. He was Marquis de Clameran, he announced that he had a great fortune and he was well received; although he had no friends, he had a large number of acquaintances. At the club at which he was introduced and admitted soon after his arrival, he found half a score of obliging men who made it a pleasure to initiate him into the secrets of fashionable life and to correct such little provincialisms as there might be in his ways of acting or thinking.

He profited well and quickly by these lessons. After three months he was fairly started, his reputation as a good card-player was established, and he had nobly and vaingloriously allowed himself to be compromised by a fashionable prostitute. He had lodged at a hotel at first, but soon hired a comfortable entresol near the Madeleine, with a carriage-house and stable for three horses. He furnished this "bachelor's den" only with the strict necessities of life; unfortunately, the necessities are unconscionably dear. So that, on the day that he finally moved into his new quarters, having attempted to balance his accounts, he discovered, not without dismay, that his brief apprenticeship in Paris had cost him 50,000 francs, one fourth of his whole property.

And still, as compared with his brilliant friends, he was in a condition of inferiority most distressing to his vanity, like a worthy farmer who should founder his nag trying to follow a race run by English thoroughbreds.

Fifty thousand francs! — Louis had something like an impulse to give up the game. But what! he abdicate! Moreover, his vices were blooming apace in

that charming environment. He had deemed himself a prodigiously wicked fellow in the old days, and a thousand new forms of corruption were being revealed to him. Then, too, the sight of swiftly made fortunes, the example of successes as surprising and incredible as some reverses, inflamed his imagination. He thought that in that immense city, where millions of people walk on the boulevards, he too would infallibly succeed in picking up his million. How? He had no idea, nor indeed did he look for one. He simply convinced himself that, like many others, he would have his day of good luck. Another of those errors which time alone can destroy. There is no luck at the service of fools.

In this furious race of selfish interest, one must be endowed with prodigious dexterity to bestride at the first attempt that wild mare which is called opportunity and ride her to his goal. But Louis did not reason it out. As idiotic as the man who hoped to win a prize in the lottery without buying a ticket, he said to himself: —

“Psha! opportunity, luck, a rich marriage will pull me out of it.”

No rich marriage came to hand, but the turn of the last bank-note arrived. To an urgent demand for money, his notary replied by a refusal.

“You have nothing left to sell but the château, monsieur le marquis,” he wrote. “It is unquestionably very valuable, but it is difficult, if not impossible, to find a purchaser for an estate of that size, in its present condition. Be sure that I will keep a sharp lookout for such a purchaser, and believe me,” etc.

Louis was thunderstruck, exactly as if he had not anticipated this final catastrophe. What was he to do? Ruined, having nothing to hope for, his dignity

called upon him to imitate the poor fools who, every year, burst upon the public, shine brightly for a moment, and suddenly disappear.

But Louis could not renounce that life of luxurious dissipation which he had been leading for three years. It was decreed that after leaving his fortune on the battle-field, he should leave his honor there as well. He persisted, like the penniless gambler who prowls about the gaming-tables that are closed to him, intensely interested in a game in which he has no part, always ready to hold out his hand to those whom fate favors.

At first Louis lived on the renown of his squandered fortune, on the credit which still follows the man who has spent a deal of money in a short time.

But this resource was speedily exhausted. A day came when the creditors rose *en masse* and the ruined marquis had to leave in their hands the last remnants of his opulence, his furniture, his carriages and his horses.

Taking refuge in a more than modest hotel, he could not make up his mind to break with the rich young men whom but now he had deemed his friends. He lived on them as he had previously lived on his tradespeople. He borrowed here and there, from one louis to twenty-five, and never repaid anything. He bet, and did not pay if he lost. He acted as pilot to young men, and utilized in a thousand shameful services the experience which had cost him two hundred thousand francs; he was half sycophant, half *chevalier d'industrie*.

He was not turned out-of-doors, but he was made to expiate cruelly the favor of being tolerated. They stood on no ceremony with him and told him frankly what they thought of his conduct. And so, when he

was alone in his garret, he gave way to paroxysms of frantic rage. He could submit to the worst humiliations, but had not yet reached the point where he did not feel them.

Long before this, the envy which consumed him, the covetous desires which tormented him, had choked the roots of every honorable sentiment within him. For a few years of opulence he felt that he was ready to risk everything, even to commit a crime. However, he committed no crime, but was involved in an unsavory swindling and blackmail affair.

An old friend of his family, the Comte de Commarin, saved him, hushed up the affair, and furnished him with the money to cross over to England.

What were his means of existence in London? Only the detectives of the most corrupt capital in the world can say. Descending the lowest rungs of the ladder of vice, the Marquis de Clameran lived among blacklegs and prostitutes, whose ups and downs and shameful profits he shared.

Compelled to leave London, he travelled over Europe, with no other capital than his audacity, his profound corruption, and his skill at all games of chance. At last, in 1865, having struck a lucky vein at Hambourg, he returned to Paris, where, he said to himself, people had undoubtedly forgotten him.

It was eighteen years since he had left France.

Louis de Clameran's first thought on reaching Paris, even before establishing himself in permanent quarters, even before seeking there the means of living which he knew how to find elsewhere, was for his native province. It was not that he had any relatives there, any friends even, from whom he could expect help, but he remembered the old manor for which, in the old days, the notary despaired of finding a pur-

chaser. He said to himself that perhaps the desired purchaser had come forward, and he decided to go and ascertain, thinking that, when he was once on the spot, he could obtain something for the château, which, in its day, had cost more than 100,000 francs to build.

Three days later, on a fine October evening, he arrived at Tarascon, where he ascertained that the château still belonged to him; and on the following morning, early, he started on foot for Clameran.

How everything had changed in the twenty-five years since he had left his father's roof! He could hardly have told where he was, in the very neighborhood of his birthplace, on the road he had passed over so often in his youth. And yet, although he had been through so many and such strange adventures, his emotion was so great that for a moment he had an idea of retracing his steps. And if he kept on, it was because a secret voice, instinct with hope, cried out to him: "Forward! forward!" as if he were destined to find at the end of the road a new life and the fortune he craved.

But, as he went on, the changes that had taken place seemed to him less striking; he recognized his home. Soon he distinguished the church tower of Clameran village through the trees, then the village itself, lying along the gentle slope of an olive-crowned hillside. He recognized the first houses; the farrier's shed with the vine running along its roof, the vicarage, and, farther on, the inn where he used to go with his brother Gaston to knock the balls about on a huge billiard-table with pockets as big as bushel baskets.

In spite of what he called his contempt of vulgar prejudices, an indefinable emotion oppressed his

heart. He could not avoid a melancholy retrospect—his mind involuntarily wandered back into the past. How much had happened since those youthful days when he strolled along the familiar paths, when a friendly face greeted him at every door. Then life seemed to him like one of those fairy tales in which every desire is gratified. And now he was returning, worn out, used up, disgusted with the realities of life, having emptied the cup of shame to the dregs, ruined in honor and in pocket, with nothing further to expect or to lose. And the few villagers whom he met stopped and turned to look at this stranger with the dust-covered shoes.

The door of Saint-Jean's house was open; he entered, and finding no one in the great kitchen with its monumental chimney-piece, he called.

"Coming!" replied a voice.

In a moment a man of about forty, with an honest, smiling face, appeared at the door at the rear of the room, surprised to find a stranger in his house.

"Can I do anything for you, monsieur?" he asked.

"Is n't this where Saint-Jean lives, who was formerly the Marquis de Clameran's valet?"

"My father has been dead five years, monsieur," replied the man, sadly.

This news affected Louis painfully, as if the old man whom he expected to find could have restored to him something of his youth. He sighed and said:

"I am the Marquis de Clameran."

At these words the man uttered a joyful exclamation.

"You, monsieur le marquis," he cried; "you!"

He seized Louis' hands and pressed them with affectionate respect.

"Ah! if my poor father was still in this world," he

continued, "how happy he would be! His last words here were for his old masters, monsieur le marquis. How often he used to groan over not hearing from you! He is underground, poor man, but I, Joseph, his son, belong to you as he did. You, in my house! what good fortune! Ah, my wife will be very happy, I've talked to her so much about the Clamerans."

He rushed from the room, shouting at the top of his voice: —

"Toinette! I say, Antoinette, just come here a minute and see who's here!"

This eager, cordial welcome affected Louis deliciously. It was so many years since he had heard a word of sincere affection, of unselfish devotion, since a genuinely friendly hand had pressed his!

But a pretty young woman, with dark complexion and great brown eyes, blushing and confused, entered the room, half dragged in by Joseph.

"This is my wife, monsieur le marquis," he said. "Ah! *dame!* I did n't give her any time to go and prink; this is monsieur le marquis, Antoinette."

The young woman bowed; awe-struck as she was, she could find nothing to say, so offered her forehead, on which Louis deposited a kiss.

"In a moment," said Joseph, "monsieur le marquis will see the children; they're at school, and I have just sent for them."

The husband and wife vied with each other in lavishing attentions on the marquis. He must feel the need of something, they said, having come on foot from Tarascon; he must take a glass of wine while waiting for breakfast; for he would do them the honor to breakfast with them, would he not? And Joseph went down to the cellar, while Toinette was

chasing the plumpest of the chickens in the poultry yard.

In a twinkling all was prepared, and Louis sat down in the middle of the kitchen, at a table laden with the best that could be obtained, waited upon by Joseph and his wife, who stood opposite him, scrutinizing him with a sort of tearful curiosity.

The children had returned from school, all besmeared with the juice of the little berries which the country people call *falabrègues*, the fruit of the Indian date-plum. Louis kissed them, and they stood in a corner, in awe-struck silence, gazing at him with wide-open, bewildered eyes.

The great news had spread through the village, and as the door stood open, people came in every moment to pay their respects to the Marquis de Clameran.

"I am So-and-so, monsieur le marquis; don't you recognize me? Ah! but I recognized you. The dead and gone marquis thought a great deal of me," said one old man. — "Don't you remember," another asked, "the time you lent me your gun to go hunting?"

Louis received with secret delight all these protestations, all these proofs of a devotion which years had not impaired. The voices of these good people awoke a thousand forgotten memories, and he felt anew the keen sensations of his youth. So it seemed that no echo of the tempests of his life, no suspicion of his ignominious career had reached this humble village on the banks of the Rhône. He, the adventurer, spurned on every side, the hero of the gaming-houses, the black-leg, the degraded confederate of the swindlers of London, basked in these evidences of veneration for the family of Clameran, and it seemed to him that they restored to him something of his consideration and esteem.

Ah! if only he had possessed at that moment the fourth part of the inheritance he had scattered to the wind of absurd caprices, with what satisfaction he would have settled down in that village to end his days in peace! But such repose after so purposeless and agitated a life, such a haven after so many shipwrecks, were not for him. He had nothing; how was he to live?

This distressing consciousness of his past misery alone gave him the courage to ask Joseph for the keys of the château, which he proposed to inspect.

"You need only the key to the gate, monsieur le marquis," said Joseph, "and hardly that."

It was true. Time had done its work, and the noble manor of Clameran was nought but a ruin. The rain and the sunshine, with the aid of the mistral, had rotted the doors and reduced the shutters to dust. Here and there could be discovered traces of friendly hands, the hands of Saint-Jean and his son, who had tried to delay the utter ruin of the mansion; but of what avail were their efforts!

Within, the desolation was even greater. All the furniture which Louis had not ventured to sell was still in place, but in such a condition! There were hardly more than a few tattered strips of the curtains and remnants of bed-hangings; the wood alone had resisted.

Louis, with Joseph at his heels, hardly dared enter those vast rooms where his footsteps echoed with a lugubrious sound. It seemed to him that the awe-inspiring Marquis de Clameran would rise before him and hurl maledictions at him, crying:—

"What have you done with our honor?"

Perhaps his terror had another cause; perhaps he had too much reason to remember that fall from his

horse, so fatal to Gaston. Not until he stood in the garden, in the bright sunlight, did he recover his self-assurance and remember the object of his visit.

"Poor Saint-Jean," he said, "did very wrong not to make use of the furniture of the château; it is all ruined, and has been of no use to any one."

"Father would not have dared to disturb anything without express orders, monsieur le marquis."

"And he made a great mistake. As for the château, if we don't take care it will soon be ruined, like the furniture. To my great regret, my fortune will not permit me to restore it; so I have decided to sell it while it is still standing."

Joseph looked upon this suggestion as something very like sacrilege; but he was not so outspoken as his father, he dared not say what he thought.

"Would it be very difficult," inquired Louis, "to sell the old barrack?"

"That depends on your price, monsieur le marquis; I know a man in the neighborhood who would take it, if he could get it cheap."

"Who is the man?"

"A certain Fougereux, who lives across the Rhône at the farm of La Montagnette. He's a Beaucaire boy, who married, some twelve years ago, a servant of the late Comtesse de la Verberie, whom monsieur le marquis may remember, — a very dark, buxom girl named Mihonne."

Louis did not remember Mihonne.

"When can we see this Fougereux?" he asked.

"To-day, by simply crossing the Rhône in the ferry-boat."

"Very well, let us go. I am pressed for time."

A whole generation had disappeared since Louis had left his province. The ferryman was no longer

Pilorel, the old sailor of the Republic, but his son. But he, too, had great respect for tradition. When he learned the name of the stranger who was with Joseph, he made haste to prepare his boat, and in a moment was pushing out into the current with his passengers.

While Pilorel rowed with all his strength, Joseph exerted himself to put the marquis on his guard against Fougereux' cunning tricks.

"He's a sly fox," he said, "too sly, in fact. I have never had a good opinion of him since his marriage, which was a villanous performance. Mihonne was past fifty when he took it into his head to pay court to her, and he was n't twenty-five. You can imagine that it was the money he was after, not the woman. The poor fool believed that the fellow loved her, and *dame !* she gave him her hand and her crowns."

"And he has made the most of them," observed Pilorel.

"That's true. Fougereux has n't his equal for making money sweat. He is rich to-day, but he ought to thank Mihonne for his wealth. You can understand his not loving her, for she looks like his grandmother ; but it's shameful for him to deprive her of everything and beat her like a dog."

"He'd like to see her six feet underground !" said the ferryman.

"And he'll put her there before long. She's like one dead, poor old woman, since Fougereux brought a young hussy to his house, who has made her her servant."

They landed. Joseph and the marquis, after requesting the ferryman to await their return, bent their steps toward La Montagnette. It was a farm-house of respectable appearance, well kept, and surrounded by fields under excellent cultivation.

Joseph having asked for the master, a young boy answered that M. Fougereux was in the fields close by, and that they would send for him. He soon appeared. He was a very short man, with a red beard and a restless, shifty eye. Although he affected to detest nobles and priests, the hope of driving a good bargain made him obsequious to the point of servility. He eagerly ushered Louis into his living-room, with many reverences, and "monsieur le marquises" without end.

As they entered, he spoke to an old woman who was trembling with fever by the fireless hearth, and roughly ordered her to go down and get some wine for Monsieur le Marquis de Clameran. At that name the old woman sprang to her feet as if she had touched an electric battery. She seemed to be about to speak, but a glance from her tyrant arrested the words in her throat. With a distraught air she obeyed, and returned with a bottle and three glasses, which she placed on the table. Then she resumed her place by the hearth, forgetting to listen in order to gaze at the marquis.

Was that creature in very truth the plump and light-hearted Mihonne, who had been the confidante of the little fairy of La Verberie? Valentine herself would not have recognized the poor old woman, shrunken and faded and wrinkled as a tree-toad at Easter; more withered and distorted than a branch of dead wood. Only those who have lived in the country know what years, aided by misery, can make of a woman.

Meanwhile, Joseph and Fougereux were haggling over the price of the château. The peasant offered an absurd price,—his only purpose in purchasing, he said, being to pull down and sell the materials.

Joseph, for his part, dilated upon the beams and rafters, the stone and the iron-work, to say nothing of the land.

To Mihonne the marquis's presence was one of those events which change the current of existence. Although the faithful servant had hitherto lisped not a word of the secrets confided to her honor, they had none the less seemed to her a heavy burden to carry. Married, and so miserably unhappy in her marriage that she longed for death, she blamed, not herself, but everybody and everything for her misfortunes. Superstitious to excess, she traced the origin of her misery to the oath taken on the Gospel during mass. Having no child, although she had ardently longed for one, she was convinced that God had stricken her with sterility to punish her for having had a share in the desertion of a poor innocent child.

She had often thought that by revealing the whole story she could allay the divine wrath and bring back happiness to her fireside. Her attachment to Valentine had given her strength to resist this incessant temptation. But to-day the presence of Louis turned the scale. On reflection, she could see no danger in confiding in Gaston's brother.

While she reflected, the bargain was struck. It was agreed that Fougereux should give 5,280 francs in cash for the château and the land adjoining, and that Joseph should have the remains of the furniture. The purchaser and the marquis exchanged a hearty grasp of the hand as they uttered the sacramental word: —

“Done!”

And Fougereux at once went out to fetch, from the nook known to him alone, the bottle with which to bind the bargain.

Chance favored Mihonne. She rose, walked over to the marquis, and said, in a low, hurried voice: —

"I must speak to you alone, monsieur le marquis."

"To me, my good woman?"

"To you. It is a secret of life or death. Come under the walnut-trees yonder at nightfall to-night; I will be there and tell you everything."

She returned to her seat as her husband entered. Fougereux gayly filled the glasses and drank Clameran's health. As they returned to the boat, Louis deliberated as to whether he should keep that singular appointment.

"What the devil can that old witch want to say to me?" he said to Joseph.

"Who knows! She was in the service of a woman who was the late M. Gaston's mistress, so my father told me. If I were in your place, monsieur le marquis, I would go. You can dine with us, and after dinner Pilorel will row you across."

Curiosity turned the scale in Louis' mind, and about seven o'clock he arrived under the walnuts. Old Mihonne had been waiting for him a long while.

"Here you are, my dear monsieur," she said joyfully; "I was beginning to despair —"

"Here I am, my good woman; now what have you to say to me?"

"Oh! many things, monsieur le marquis; but, first of all, have you ever heard from your brother?"

Louis almost regretted that he had come, thinking that the old woman was in her dotage.

"You know very well," he replied, "that my poor brother jumped into the Rhône and died there."

"What!" cried Mihonne, "what! you don't know that he escaped? Yes, he did what no one else will ever do; he swam across the Rhone when it had

overflowed its banks. The next day Mademoiselle Valentine went to Clameran to tell of his safety, and Saint-Jean would n't let her speak to you. Later, I went there to take you a letter, but you had gone away."

These revelations, after twenty years, confounded Louis.

"Are n't you mistaking your dreams for realities, my good woman?" he said gently.

Mihonne shook her head sadly.

"No," she replied, "no. And if Père Menoul was still alive he'd tell you how he took M. Gaston as far as Camargue, and how your brother went from there to Marseille, and sailed from there on some ship. But all this is nothing: M. Gaston has a son."

"My brother, a son! Really, my dear old lady, you're losing your mind."

"Alas! no; to my undoing in this world and the next, he had a son by Mademoiselle Valentine, a poor innocent child whom I received in my arms in a foreign land, and carried to the woman who took charge of him for money."

Thereupon Mihonne told the whole story,—the countess's anger, the journey to London, the abandonment of little Raoul. With the unerring memory of those who, being unable to read or write, cannot intrust their thoughts to paper, she narrated the most trivial circumstances, giving the most precise details, the name of the village and of the farmer's wife, all of the child's names, and the exact date of everything.

Then she told of Valentine's wretchedness after her fault, the countess's ruin, and finally the poor girl's marriage to a rich gentleman from Paris, so rich that he did not know the amount of his own fortune; a banker named Fauvel.

A sharp, prolonged cry interrupted her.

"Great Heaven!" she exclaimed in a voice trembling with terror, "my husband is calling me." And she hurried back to the farm as rapidly as her old legs could carry her.

For some moments after she had left him, Louis stood motionless on the same spot. As he listened to Mihonne's story, an infamous thought had come to him, so detestable that it made even his mind recoil, ready as it was for anything; and that idea returned, constantly gaining ground like the waves of the incoming tide. He knew the rich banker by reputation, and he thought of all the profit he might make out of what he had just heard. There are secrets which, when shrewdly exploited, are worth as much as a farm in Brie. The horrors of a destitute old age banished his last remaining scruples.

"First of all," he said to himself, "I must make sure of the truth of what this old woman says; after that, I will make my plans."

That was why Louis de Clameran started for London two days later, having received the 5,280 francs from Fougereux.

XVI

AFTER more than twenty years of married life, Valentine de la Verberie, Madame Fauvel, had known only one real sorrow, but it was one of those which assail our dearest affections. In 1859 she had lost her mother, who was attacked by inflammation of the lungs during one of her frequent visits to Paris.

To her latest breath the redoubtable old Comtesse de la Verberie remained in full possession of her

senses, and a few moments before she died she said to her daughter: —

“Well! was I right or not in urging you to hold your tongue? Your silence has procured for me a pleasant old age, for which I thank you; and it assures you a peaceful future.”

Since then, Madame Fauvel often said, she had had no serious cause of grief, she had had no reason to shed a single tear.

What had she to desire? After so many years, André was still what he was in the first days of their union. To his love, which had grown no less, was added the blissful intimacy which results from conformity of thought and boundless confidence.

Everything had succeeded with that fortunate couple. André had determined to be wealthy; he was wealthy far beyond his hopes; yes, and far beyond his desires and Valentine's. Their two sons, Lucien and Abel, as handsome as their mother, noble hearts, intelligent minds, were of the chosen few who are the just pride of their families and carry abroad a sort of reflection of the happiness of their homes.

It was decreed that nothing should be lacking to Valentine's perfect felicity. For her hours of solitude, when it chanced that her husband and sons were away from home in the evening, she had a companion, M. Fauvel's niece Madeleine, an accomplished girl whom she had brought up, whom she loved as one of her own children, and who had for her the watchful affection of a devoted daughter. Madeleine had lost her parents, poor but honest people, when she was in her cradle, and Valentine had willingly taken charge of her, perhaps in memory of the poor child abandoned in London. It seemed to her that God would bless her for that charitable deed, and

that Madeleine would be the guardian angel of the household.

On the day of the orphan's arrival, M. Fauvel had announced that he proposed to open an account for her, and he had, in fact, set aside ten thousand francs as Madeleine's marriage portion. That ten thousand francs the wealthy banker had amused himself by speculating with in a most extraordinary way. He, who had never risked a sou in a doubtful speculation on his own account, took delight in investing in securities of the most problematical value with his niece's money. It was only play, and so he always won, the result being that in fifteen years the ten thousand francs had become half a million.

Thus they who envied the Fauvel family were justified in their envy.

In due time even Valentine's poignant remorse and anxiety subsided. Under the beneficent influence of that atmosphere of happiness, she had almost found forgetfulness and peace of mind. She had expiated her sin so cruelly, she had suffered so keenly for having deceived André, that she fancied that she had squared her account with fate.

She dared now to look the future in the face; her youth had vanished in a dense mist and was like the vague memory of a painful dream. Yes, she had really come to believe that she was safe, when, on a certain afternoon in November, during the absence of her husband, who had been compelled to leave Paris on important business, one of her servants brought her a letter which had been left with the concierge by a stranger who refused to give his name.

Without the vaguest presentiment to make her hand tremble or hesitate, she broke the seal and read:—

MADAME, — Do I rely too much upon the memory of your heart in hoping for half an hour's interview? I shall have the honor to call upon you to-morrow between two and three o'clock.

MARQUIS DE CLAMERAN.

Luckily Madame Fauvel was alone. A spasm of pain as horrible as that which precedes death tore the poor woman's heart as she ran her eye over the note at one glance. Ten times she read it in an undertone, as if to impress thoroughly upon her mind the ghastly reality, — to persuade herself that she was not the victim of an hallucination. Ten times, with a terror bordering on madness, she pronounced that name once so sweet to her lips — Clameran — spelling it out as if she were not familiar with it. And the eight letters forming the name blazed before her eyes with the ominous glare of the lightning that precedes the thunder.

Ah! she had believed, she had hoped that that fatal past was forgotten, that it was dead, blotted out. Folly! Lo, it suddenly appeared in her path, living, threatening, pitiless. Poor woman! As if all human and divine powers combined could prevent that which was to be. And it was at the hour of her greatest security, when she believed in the forgiveness of destiny, when she was perfectly happy, that the catastrophe burst upon her, shattering in a thousand pieces the fragile edifice of her hopes.

Not for a long time was she able to collect her thoughts, more widely scattered than autumn leaves after a storm, and to reflect. But then she began to say to herself that she had taken fright too soon and without cause. From whom was the letter? From Gaston of course. Well! what reason was there to tremble? Gaston, having returned to France, de-

sired to see her once more. She could understand that desire; but she knew the man, whom she had once loved so dearly, well enough to be sure that she had nothing to fear from him. He would come, he would find her married to another, an old woman and a mother; they would exchange memories, regrets perhaps; she would return the jewels he had intrusted to her, and that would be all.

But she was assailed by horrible doubts. Should she tell Gaston that she had had a son by him? To confess was to put herself in his power; it was to place at the mercy of a man—the most loyal and honorable of men to be sure, but still a man—not only her honor and her happiness, but the honor and happiness of her husband and children.

To hold her peace, on the other hand, was to commit a crime; to rob her child of his father's name and fortune after abandoning him, after depriving him of a mother's care and caresses.

She was still undecided, asking herself what she should decide to do, when dinner was announced. But she felt that she had not the courage to go down. To meet the eyes of her sons was beyond her strength. She said that she was not feeling at all well, and went to her room, overjoyed, for the first time, that her husband was absent.

Madeleine, disturbed by the message she had sent, hastened to her side, but she sent her away, saying that it was nothing but a headache, and that she wanted to try to sleep. Her real desire was to remain alone in face of her misfortune; and her mind strove to peer into the future, to divine what would happen on the morrow.

That morrow, at once so dreaded and so longed for, came at last. Until two o'clock she counted the

hours; after that she counted the minutes. At last, just as the clock struck half-past two, the door of the salon was thrown open and a servant announced: —

“Monsieur le Marquis de Clameran.”

Madame Fauvel had determined that she would remain calm, even cold. During the wretched sleepless night she had exerted herself to anticipate and arrange in advance all the details of this painful interview. She had even thought what words she would use — first she would say this, then that. But at the critical moment her courage failed her; paralyzing emotion held her fast upon her chair, speechless, without an idea.

He, meanwhile, after bowing respectfully, stood in the centre of the salon, waiting. He was a man of about fifty years, with moustache and hair just turning gray, with a stern and melancholy face and an aristocratic air, carrying himself with distinction in his black clothes.

A prey to indescribable sensations, quivering with emotion, Madame Fauvel gazed at him, seeking upon his face some trace of the features of the man she had loved even to self-abandonment, of that lover whose lips had rested upon hers, who had pressed her to his heart, by whom she had had a son. And she was amazed that she could detect in the matured man no sign of the youth whose memory had haunted her life — no, none.

At last, as he did not move, she murmured in a dying voice: —

“Gaston!”

But he shook his head sadly as he replied: —

“I am not Gaston, madame. My brother has succumbed to the sorrows and miseries of exile; I am Louis de Clameran.”

What! it was not Gaston who had written to her! it was not Gaston who stood there before her! A shiver of terror shook her from head to foot; she was seized with one of those fits of vertigo which attack one on the edge of a precipice. It was not he! And her accent, as she faltered the name Gaston, was the most explicit of confessions. In Heaven's name what could he want of her, this brother in whom Gaston, as she knew, had not had sufficient confidence to intrust their secret to him?

A thousand probabilities, each more terrifying than the rest, presented themselves to her mind at the same moment. However, she succeeded in overcoming her apprehensions so promptly that Louis hardly detected them. The horrible strangeness of her situation, the very imminence of the danger imparted unusual lucidity to her mind. With a careless gesture she waved Louis to a chair facing her own, and said in the calmest tone: —

“In that case, monsieur, be good enough to explain to me the object of a visit which I was far from expecting.”

The marquis did not choose to notice this sudden change. Keeping his eyes persistently fixed on Madame Fauvel's, he seated himself.

“First of all, madame,” he began, “I must ask you if any one can overhear what we say here.”

“Why that question? I do not believe that you have anything to say to me which my husband and my children may not hear.”

Louis shrugged his shoulders with a visible affectation of compassion, as a sane man might do at the divagations of a lunatic.

“Permit me to insist, madame,” he said, — “not in my own interest but yours.”

"Speak, monsieur, speak without fear; we are in no danger of being overheard here."

Despite this assurance the marquis moved his chair nearer Madame Fauvel's, so that he might speak in a lower tone, as if he were terrified by what he had to say.

"As I told you, madame," he said, "Gaston is dead. As was most fitting, I received his last thoughts, and it was I whom he selected to carry out his last wishes. Do you understand now?"

She understood only too well, poor woman! but in vain did she strive to divine the project of this ill-omened visitor. Perhaps he had come for the sole purpose of claiming Gaston's precious deposit.

"I will not remind you," pursued Louis, "of the melancholy circumstances which wrecked my brother's life and ruined his future. Happy as your life has been, you cannot have forgotten that friend of your youth, who, without hesitation, without reflection, gave his life when your honor was threatened."

Not a muscle of Madame Fauvel's face stirred. She seemed to be searching her memory for the circumstance to which Louis alluded.

"Have you forgotten, madame?" he continued in a bitter tone. "I will try and explain myself more clearly. A long time, oh! a very long time ago, you loved my unfortunate brother."

"Monsieur!"

"Oh! it is useless to deny it, madame. Must I tell you again that Gaston told me everything, everything?" he added, emphasizing the word.

But Madame Fauvel had no reason to be alarmed by this assertion. What could this "everything" be? Nothing at all, since Gaston had gone away ignorant of the fact that she was *enceinte*. She rose, and with

an affectation of assurance which she was far indeed from feeling, she said: —

"It seems to me, monsieur, that you forget that you are talking now to an old woman, a wife and mother. It may be that your brother loved me — that is his secret, not yours. If, when I was young and inexperienced, I was not absolutely prudent, it is not for you to remind me of it. *He* would not have done it! However, whatever the past to which you refer may have been, I have forgotten it for twenty years."

"You have forgotten, you say?"

"Everything, absolutely."

"Even your child, madame?"

This question, uttered with one of those glances which go to the very bottom of the soul, was like a blow of a club to Madame Fauvel. She fell back on her chair, saying to herself: —

"What! he knows! How can he have found out?"

If she herself and no others had been concerned, she certainly would not have struggled, she would have surrendered at discretion. But she had the happiness and welfare of her loved ones to protect and defend, and from the consciousness of that sacred duty she derived an energy of which no one would have deemed her capable.

"I judge that you mean to insult me, monsieur!" she said.

"So it is really true—you do not remember Valentine-Raoul?"

"Why, this must be a wager!"

She saw now that the man really knew all. From what source? It mattered little to her. He knew. But she was resolved, firmly resolved to deny none the less obstinately, even in face of the clearest, the

most undeniable evidence. For a moment she had an idea of turning the Marquis de Clameran out of her house. Prudence stayed her hand. She said to herself that she must at least know something of his plans.

"Wager or no," she continued with a forced laugh, "what is your meaning?"

"This, madame. Two years ago the chances of exile took my brother to London. In a family there he fell in with a young man named Raoul. This young man's features and his intelligence made so deep an impression on Gaston that he determined to find out who he was. He was a foundling, and my brother, having made full inquiry, became absolutely certain that this Raoul was his son, and yours, madame."

"This tale of yours sounds like a novel."

"Yes, madame, and the dénouement is in your hands. The countess your mother had certainly taken the most minute and most skilful precautions to hide your secret; but the best laid plans are always weak in some point. After your departure a friend of your mother in London went to look her up at the village where you had been living. She mentioned your real name in the presence of the farmer's wife who had taken charge of the child. Everything was discovered. My brother wished for proofs, and he procured positive, incontrovertible proofs."

He paused, seeking the effect of his words on Madame Fauvel's face. To his great surprise she seemed neither moved nor disturbed; there was a twinkle in her eye.

"And then?" she inquired in the most indifferent tone.

"Then, madame, Gaston acknowledged the child.

But the Clamerans are poor; my brother died on a hospital cot, and I have only a pension of 1,200 francs to live upon. What would become of Raoul, alone, without relatives, without a protector, without a friend? Such forebodings as these tormented my brother's last moments."

"Really, monsieur —"

"I am nearly done," Louis interposed. "It was then that Gaston opened his heart to me. It was then that he bade me appeal to you. 'Valentine,' he said to me, 'Valentine will remember; she will not be able to endure the thought that our son is in want of everything, even of bread; she is rich, very rich, — I shall die in peace.'"

Madame Fauvel had risen; this time he was evidently dismissed.

"You will admit, will you not, monsieur," she said, "that my patience is very great?"

This imperturbable assurance was so disconcerting to Louis that he made no reply.

"I have no objection to saying to you," she continued, "that, many years ago, I did possess M. Gaston de Clameran's confidence. I propose to prove it to you by returning to you the jewels formerly belonging to your mother the marchioness, which he intrusted to me at the time of his departure."

As she spoke she took from under one of the cushions of the couch on which she was sitting the silk purse containing the jewels, and handed it to Louis.

"Here are the jewels, monsieur le marquis," she said; "permit me to express my surprise that your brother never called upon me for them."

Had his self-control been less remarkable, Louis would have betrayed his astonishment.

"I was instructed," he said dryly, "not to mention these jewels."

Without replying Madame Fauvel put out her hand toward a bell-rope.

"You will excuse me, monsieur," she said, "if I put an end to an interview to which I assented for the sole purpose of restoring these valuable articles."

Being thus repulsed, M. de Clameran did not think it advisable to persist.

"So be it, madame," said he; "I take my leave. I will simply add that my brother also said: 'If Valentine has forgotten everything, if she should refuse to assure our son's future, I order you to force her to do it.' Consider those words, madame, for what I have sworn to do, that I will do, upon my honor!"

At last Madame Fauvel was alone, she was free. At last she could, without fear, allow her despair full vent. Exhausted by the efforts she had been forced to put forth in order to remain calm under Clameran's eye, she felt completely shattered in body and mind. She could hardly find the strength to totter up to her bedroom and lock herself in. Now there was an end to all doubt, her fears had become realities. She could measure with certainty the height of the precipice over which she was about to be pushed, dragging all her family with her. In that great peril, God alone could come to her aid. She prayed: —

"O God, punish me and I will bless the punishment, for I am very guilty. Punish me, for I have been a wicked daughter, an unworthy mother, and a deceitful wife. Smite me, O God, but smite me alone! Let thy just wrath spare the innocent; have pity on my husband and my sons!"

What were her twenty years of happiness compared to this hour of despair? Nothing, — one long re-

morse. Ah! why had she listened to her mother, why had she not killed herself? Now, all hope was gone. That man who had just left her, with a threat on his lips, would return; she knew it only too well. What reply should she give him?

This once she had succeeded in subduing the revolts of her heart and her conscience; but would she have the same courage, the same control over her feelings another time? She fully realized that she owed her courage, at which she herself was astonished, to Clameran's bad management. Ah! if he had implored instead of threatening! She was very, very near betraying herself when Louis spoke of Raoul. Her very entrails had quivered at the name of the poor abandoned child who was expiating his mother's sins. At the thought that he might be subjected to the distresses of poverty, her whole being shuddered with the keenest pain. He, her child, lack bread! And she was rich, and all Paris envied her magnificence! Ah! if only she could lay at his feet all that she possessed! With what joy would she have undergone the most painful privations! But how, without betraying her secret, could she give him enough money to place him out of reach of the hardships of life?

The voice of prudence cried out to her that she must not, could not accept the mediation of Louis de Clameran. To confide in him was to place herself and all her dear ones at his mercy, and he inspired an instinctive terror in her. She went so far as to wonder if he had really told her the truth. As she reviewed his story in her mind, she found great gaps in it, and some almost fatal improbabilities. How was it possible that Gaston, having returned to France, living in Paris, and being as poor as his brother said, had

not called upon the woman for the treasure intrusted to the girl? Why, if he were fearful for their child's future, had he not come to her, since he supposed her to be so rich that, when he died, he relied upon her?

A thousand vague anxieties floated through her mind; she was haunted by indefinable, inexplicable suspicions. She realized that a single definite step would bind her fast forever, and then what would he not demand of her!

For a moment she had an idea of throwing herself at her husband's feet, and confessing all. Unhappily, she rejected that chance of salvation. Her imagination pictured that upright man's heart-rending grief when he discovered, after more than twenty years, that he had been shamefully tricked. Would he not, knowing that he had been deceived at the beginning, suspect that he had been always deceived? Would he believe in the wife's loyalty when he discovered the perfidy of the girl?

She knew André well enough to know that he would say nothing, and that he would do everything in his power to stifle this ghastly business. But it would be all over with the happiness of the household. He would shun the home circle; the sons, too, would go away, and all the family ties would be broken.

Thereupon thoughts of suicide haunted her. But she reflected that her death would not stay the implacable Clameran's hand, and that, being unable to dishonor her living, he would besmirch her memory.

Luckily, the banker was absent, so that Madame Fauvel was able to keep her room during the two days succeeding Louis' visit, and no one noticed her agitation. Madeleine, however, with her woman's

shrewdness, divined that there was something beside the nervous trouble of which her aunt complained, and for which the doctor prescribed all sorts of sedative potions. Nay, more, she noticed that the trouble seemed to have been caused by the visit of a stern-faced individual, who had remained a long time alone with her aunt. Madeleine was so confident of the existence of a secret that, on the second day, seeing that Madame Fauvel was more restless than ever, she ventured to say to her: —

“You are depressed, dear aunt; what is the matter? tell me; would n’t you like me to send and ask our dear curé to come and talk with you?”

With a curtness most extraordinary in her, who was the personification of gentleness, Madame Fauvel rejected her niece’s suggestion.

What Louis had foreseen actually happened. On reflection, seeing no escape from her deplorable plight, Madame Fauvel little by little made up her mind to yield. By consenting to everything, she had a chance of saving everything. She cherished no delusions, she realized that she was preparing an unendurable life for herself, but at all events she would suffer alone, and she would at least gain time.

Meanwhile M. Fauvel had returned, and Valentine, in appearance at least, had resumed her usual mode of life. But she was no longer the happy mother, the smiling, placid-faced wife, so secure in her happiness, so calm in face of the future. Everything about her indicated a horrible anxiety. Hearing nothing from Clameran, she expected him, so to speak, every minute in the day, starting at every peal of the bell, turning pale whenever the door opened, afraid to go out lest he should appear in her absence. The condemned man who says to himself every morning on

waking, "Will it be to-day?" suffers no more horrible agony.

Clameran did not come; he wrote — or rather, as he was too prudent to forge weapons against himself, he had a note written, of which Madame Fauvel alone could understand the meaning, and in which he said that he was sick, and apologized for being obliged to make an appointment with her, for the second day thereafter, in his apartment at the Hôtel du Louvre.

This letter was almost a relief to Madame Fauvel. She had reached the point where she preferred anything to her anxiety. She was determined to consent to everything. So she burned the letter, saying to herself, "I will go."

So it was that, two days later, at the hour named, she put on her simplest black gown, that one of her hats which concealed her face most effectually, slipped a veil into her pocket, and went out.

Not until she was a long way from her house did she venture to take a cab, which set her down at the Hôtel du Louvre. There, new anxieties assailed her. As she received much company, and went often into society, she was known to a great multitude of people, and she shuddered at the idea of being recognized. What would any one think who should see her at the Hôtel du Louvre in that costume, that old-fashioned hat and thick veil? Certainly every one who met her would believe that some intrigue was on foot, that she was on her way to an assignation, and she would be ruined. In her inexperience — for it was the first time since her marriage that she had had occasion to conceal her actions — she did everything to pass unnoticed, that is to say, everything to attract notice.

The concierge told her that Monsieur le Marquis Louis de Clameran's bedroom was on the third floor.

She hastily ascended the stairs, happy to escape all the eyes which seemed to be fixed upon her; but, notwithstanding the most minute directions, she lost herself in the immense hotel and wandered a long while through the endless corridors. At last she reached a door over which was the number she sought, 317. She paused, pressing both hands to her breast, as if to still the palpitations of her heart, which was beating as if it would burst. As she was about to enter, to venture upon that decisive step, an immense terror took possession of her and paralyzed her limbs.

The sight of a guest of the hotel passing along the corridor put an end to her hesitation. With trembling hand she tapped gently three times on the door.

"Come in," said a voice.

She went in. But it was not the Marquis de Clameran who stood in the middle of the room; it was a very young man, almost a child, who looked at her with a peculiar expression.

Madame Fauvel's first idea was that she had made a mistake.

"I beg your pardon, monsieur," she faltered, redder than a poppy; "I thought that this was Monsieur le Marquis de Clameran's room."

"You are in his room, madame," the young man replied.

And, seeing that she did not speak, that she seemed to be trying to decide how to retire, how to escape, he added:—

"I believe that I have the honor of addressing Madame Fauvel?"

She made an affirmative sign with her head: yes. She shuddered when she heard her name uttered in that place; she was dismayed by the certainty that

she was known, that Clameran had already betrayed her secret. And her anxiety was plainly visible as she awaited an explanation.

"Have no fear, madame," resumed the young man; "you are as safe here as in your own salon. Monsieur de Clameran has intrusted me with his excuses; you will not see him."

"But, monsieur, in view of an urgent letter which he sent me day before yesterday, I was bound to suppose, I did suppose—"

"When he wrote you, madame, he had certain plans, which he has renounced forever."

"What!" she said, with instinctive distrust, "his purposes have changed?"

The countenance of Madame Fauvel's young companion indicated a sort of pained compassion, as if he were receiving all the unfortunate woman's suffering on the rebound.

"The marquis!" he replied, in a mild, sad voice, "has abandoned what he considered—wrongfully considered—a sacred duty. Believe me, he hesitated a long while before he went to demand from you the most painful of confessions. You spurned him, you refused to listen to him, and he did not understand what imperative motives dictated your conduct. On that day, blinded by unjust wrath, he swore to extort by terror what he had not obtained from your heart. Determined to threaten your happiness, he had collected a quantity of evidence of the sort that admits of no denial. Forgive him—a promise given to a dying brother bound him."

He had taken from the mantel a package of papers, which he turned over as he spoke.

"Here are the proofs I speak of," he continued, "precise, incontrovertible. Here is the certificate of

Sedley, the clergyman, the declaration of Mistress Dobbin, the farmer's wife, a statement from the surgeon, the depositions of persons who knew Madame de la Verberie in London. Oh! not a link is missing. I had great difficulty in obtaining the documents from Monsieur de Clameran. Perhaps he divined my intention, for this, madame, is what I was determined to do with these proofs."

With a swift movement he threw all the papers into the fire; they burned rapidly, and soon there was nothing left of them but a pinch of ashes.

"Everything is destroyed," he said, his eye gleaming with the most generous resolutions. "The past, if you choose, is blotted out like those papers. If any one dares now to assert that you had a son before your marriage, deal with him boldly as a slanderer. The proofs no longer exist, you are free."

At last the meaning of this scene began to become clear in Madame Fauvel's eyes, she began to understand, she understood. This young man who rescued her from Clameran's wrath, who restored her freedom of action by destroying the overwhelming proofs which would ruin her, was her abandoned child, Valentine-Raoul.

At that moment she forgot everything; the mother's affection, so long held in abeyance, overflowed at last, and in a scarcely audible voice she murmured:

"Raoul!"

On hearing that name, uttered in that tone, the young man tottered; one would have said that he was sinking beneath the weight of an unhopèd-for joy.

"Yes, Raoul," he cried, "Raoul, who preferred to die a thousand times rather than cause his mother the slightest suffering; Raoul, who would shed all his blood to spare her a tear."

She made no attempt to struggle or to resist; her whole being quivered as if her entrails had stirred on recognizing him to whom they had given birth. She opened her arms and Raoul rushed into them, saying in a voice suffocated by emotion: —

“Mother! my dear mother! Heaven bless you for this first kiss!”

It was true. She had never seen her son. Despite her prayers and her tears, they had taken him from her without even allowing her to kiss him, and the kiss she had just given him was really the first.

After so many and such cruel sufferings, to fall suddenly upon this immense joy was too great happiness. Madame Fauvel sank upon a chair, and, plunged in a species of ecstatic meditation, she gazed greedily at Raoul, who was kneeling at her feet. How beautiful he appeared to her, poor abandoned boy! He had the radiant beauty of love children, whose features retain a sort of reflection of divine bliss. She put aside his fine, curly hair with her hand, and gazed in admiration at his forehead, as pure and white as a girl's, and his great melting eyes, and she was thirsty for his red lips.

“O mother,” said he, “I don't know what happened within me when I learned that my uncle had dared to threaten you. He, threaten you! You see, darling mother, I have your heart and my noble father's, Gaston de Clameran, as well. I tell you, when he told his brother to apply to you he was not in his right mind. I have known you well, and for a long time. My father and I used often to prowl around your house, and when we caught a glimpse of you, we went home happy. When you passed he would say, ‘There's your mother, Raoul!’ To see you was our one joy. When we knew that you were

to go to some party we used to wait at the door to see you, lovelier than ever in your lovely costume. How many times in winter I have raced with your horses in order to gaze at you longer!"

Tears, the sweetest tears she had ever shed, bathed Madame Fauvel's face. Raoul's vibrating voice sang celestial melodies in her ear. That voice reminded her of Gaston's, and brought back the quickening, adorable sensations of her youth. Yes, as she listened to him, she enjoyed anew the enchantment of their first meetings, the quivering of her still virginal heart, the mysterious agitation of her senses. It seemed to her as if time had stood still since the evening when she had abandoned herself, trembling, to Gaston's arms. André, her two sons, Madeleine, she forgot them all, being borne back into the past by this whirlwind of affection.

Raoul, meanwhile, continued: —

"Not until yesterday did I learn that my uncle had been to you to demand some crumbs of your wealth for me. What was the use? I am poor, it is true, very poor, but poverty has no terrors for me; I know it too well. I have my arms and my intelligence; I can live with them. You are very rich, they say. What difference does that make to me? Keep all your fortune, darling mother, but give me a little of your heart. Let me love you. Promise me that this first kiss shall not be the last. No one shall know anything; have no fear; I shall be able to conceal my good-fortune."

And Madame Fauvel had had it in her heart to be afraid of this son! Ah! how bitterly she reproached herself! How bitterly she reproached herself, too, for not having flown to him sooner!

She questioned him, she wished to know his life,

how he had lived, what he had done. He had nothing to conceal from her, he said; his life had been the usual life of the children of the poor. The farmer's wife who had taken charge of him had always shown him more or less affection. Indeed, because of his good conduct and intelligent appearance, she had taken pleasure in giving him a passable education, beyond her means and above his station in life. At sixteen he had been given a place in a banker's office, and was beginning to earn his bread by dint of hard work, when one day a man came and said to him, "I am your father," and took him away. Since then his happiness had lacked only a mother's affection to be complete. He had really suffered but once in his life, — on the day when his father, Gaston de Clameran, had died in his arms.

"But now," he said, "everything is forgotten, everything. Have I been unhappy? I have no idea, since I see you and love you."

Time passed, and Madame Fauvel took no heed. Raoul, luckily, was on the alert.

"Seven o'clock!" he suddenly exclaimed.

This exclamation brought Madame Fauvel back abruptly to a realization of the truth. Seven o'clock! Her long absence might perhaps be noticed.

"Shall I see you again, mother?" Raoul asked, as they parted.

"Oh! yes," she replied, with an accent of passionate affection; "yes, often, every day, to-morrow —"

It was the first time since her marriage that Madame Fauvel had noticed that she did not absolutely control her own actions. Never before had she had occasion to desire perfect freedom. She left her very soul in that room at the Hôtel du Louvre, where she had found a son. And she must needs leave

him there; she was doomed to the intolerable torture of composing her features, of concealing this momentous event which revolutionized her whole life.

As she had some difficulty in obtaining a cab for the return journey, it was after half-past seven when she reached Rue de Provence, where they were waiting for her before beginning dinner. When M. Fauvel rallied her on her tardiness he seemed to her commonplace, vulgar, and even a little foolish. Such are the sudden revolutions of passion that she deemed him almost worthy of ridicule for his boundless confidence in her. And she, who was ordinarily so fearful, answered his jests with imperturbable calmness, without confusion, almost without effort.

So intoxicating were her sensations in Raoul's presence, that in her delirium she was incapable of desiring anything, of dreaming of anything beyond the renewal of those blissful sensations. The devoted wife, the incomparable mother was no more. She hardly gave a thought to her two sons. They had always been happy and beloved, while the other, the other! What compensation did she not owe him! A little more, and in her blindness she would have charged the responsibility for Raoul's misery to her husband and children.

And she had no remorse, no stings of conscience, no apprehension of the future. Her madness was complete. To her the future was the morrow; eternity, the sixteen hours which separated her from another interview. Gaston's death seemed to her an absolution for the past as well as for the present.

But she regretted her marriage. Free, she could have devoted herself absolutely to Raoul. She was rich, but she would joyfully have exchanged all her luxury for poverty with him. Neither her husband

nor her sons would ever suspect the thoughts that agitated her; her mind was at rest so far as they were concerned; but she feared her niece. It seemed to her that, when she returned, Madeleine had looked at her with a very strange expression. Did she suspect anything? She had pursued her with strange questions for several days. She must be on her guard against her.

This uneasiness changed into a species of hatred Madame Fauvel's affection for her adopted daughter. Naturally so kind and loving, she regretted that she had taken her into her family and had thus provided herself with one of those watchful spies whom nothing escapes. How, she asked herself, could she elude the anxious solicitude born of devoted affection, the penetrating glance of a girl who had accustomed herself to follow upon her face the indications of her most fleeting emotions?

Her joy was beyond words when she discovered a method within her reach. For nearly two years there had been some talk of a marriage between Madeleine and M. Fauvel's protégé, Prosper Bertomy, the cashier of the house. Madame Fauvel said to herself that she had only to revive the subject of this marriage and press it forward as speedily as possible. Madeleine once married would go and live with her husband, and leave her at liberty to dispose of her time as she chose.

That very evening she ventured to mention Prosper, and with a duplicity of which she would have been incapable a few days earlier, she extorted Madeleine's secret.

"Aha! Mademoiselle mysterious," she said gayly, "so you have the presumption to choose among all your suitors without my leave!"

"But it seems to me, my dear aunt —"

"That I ought to have guessed? That is just what I did."

Assuming a serious air, she added: —

"That being the case, it only remains to obtain Master Prosper's consent. Will he accord it?"

"He! aunt. Ah! if he had dared —"

"Oho! indeed! so you know that, mademoiselle my niece?"

Abashed, confused, blushing, Madeleine hung her head, but Madame Fauvel drew her to her side.

"Dear child," she said, in her sweetest voice, "what are you afraid of? Have n't you, with all your cunning, guessed that your secret has been ours for a long time? Would Prosper be admitted to our family circle as if he were one of us, if your uncle and I were not satisfied with him beforehand?"

Partly to conceal her joy, perhaps, Madeleine threw her arms about her aunt's neck, murmuring: —

"Thanks, dear aunt! you are so kind, you do love me!"

Meanwhile, Madame Fauvel was saying to herself: —

"I will go at once and urge André to encourage Prosper; those children can be married as well as not within two months."

Unfortunately, borne on by the eddying whirl of a passion that left her not a moment for reflection, she postponed this project. Passing a part of every day with Raoul at the Hôtel du Louvre, she dreamed incessantly of the means of preparing a suitable position in the world for him, and of assuring him an independent fortune. She had not dared as yet to discuss the subject with him. As she came to know him better, as he became less reserved with her, she fancied

that she could detect in him all his father's noble pride, and a self-esteem so sensitive that she trembled lest she should be repulsed. She asked herself in all seriousness if he would ever consent to accept the slightest assistance from her.

When her hesitation was at its height Marquis Louis de Clameran came to her aid. She had seen him frequently since the day when he had frightened her so, and her first feeling of repulsion had been succeeded by a secret sympathy. She loved him for all the affection he manifested for her son.

While Raoul, heedless as young men are at twenty, snapped his fingers at the future, Louis, with his large and varied experience, seemed to take a lively interest in his nephew's fate. And so, one day, after some conversation of a general nature, he broached the question of a settlement.

"To live as my comely nephew is living," he began, "is delightful, no doubt; but would it not be wise for him to think about taking up a profession? He has no fortune—"

"Oh! my dear uncle," Raoul eagerly interrupted him; "for Heaven's sake let me be happy without remorse; what do I want that I have not?"

"Nothing, at this moment, my dear nephew; but when you have exhausted your resources and mine — and that will be before long — what will become of you?"

"Bah! I'll enlist; all the Clamerans are soldiers by birth, and if there is a war!"

Madame Fauvel stopped him by placing her hand gently over his mouth.

"Bad boy!" she said in a reproachful tone; "you enlist! So you mean to deprive me of the joy of seeing you?"

"No, dearest mother, no!"

"You see," insisted Louis, "that you must listen to us."

"I ask nothing better, but later on. I will work, I will earn heaps of money."

"At what, poor child? how?"

"*Dame!* I don't know; but never fear, I will look around, I will find something."

It was difficult to make this presumptuous stripling listen to reason. Louis and Madame Fauvel had long interviews on this subject, and they determined to force his hand. But it was a difficult matter to select a profession, and Clameran thought that it would be prudent to reflect, to consult the young man's tastes. Meanwhile it was agreed that Madame Fauvel should place at the marquis's disposal the wherewithal to defray all Raoul's expenses.

Looking upon this brother of Gaston as a father to her child, Madame Fauvel had speedily reached the point where she could no longer do without him. She constantly needed to see him, whether to consult him on the subject of ideas that occurred to her, or to urge this or that step upon him. So that she was well pleased on the day that he asked her to do him the honor of receiving him openly at her house. Nothing could be more easily managed. She presented the Marquis de Clameran to her husband as an old friend of her family, and it depended entirely upon himself to become an intimate of the household.

Madame Fauvel soon had reason to congratulate herself on this decision. As it was an absolute impossibility for her to continue to see Raoul every day; as she dared not, even if she wrote to him, receive replies from him, she heard from him through Louis. The reports she received did not long con-

tinue satisfactory; indeed, within less than a month from the day that Madame Fauvel recovered her son, Clameran confessed that Raoul was beginning to make him seriously anxious. The marquis expressed himself in a tone and with a manner calculated to make a mother's blood run cold; but not without embarrassment, like a man who overcomes an intense repugnance in order to discharge a duty.

"What is the trouble?" Madame Fauvel asked him.

"The trouble is," replied Louis, "that I find that the pride and passion of the Clamerans are reproduced in this boy. His is one of those natures whose outbreaks nothing will check, which are irritated by obstacles and angered by remonstrances, and I can see no barrier to oppose to his violence."

"Great God! what can he have done?"

"Nothing exactly blameworthy, certainly nothing irreparable, but the thought of his future frightens me. He knows nothing as yet of your generosity to him; he thinks that he is drawing on my purse, and I find that he is as extravagant as a millionaire's son."

Madame Fauvel would have been no true mother had she not undertaken to defend Raoul.

"Perhaps you are a little severe," she said. "Poor child! he has suffered so much! Hitherto he has known nothing but privations, and good fortune intoxicates him. He pounces on dissipation as a starving man pounces on a hearty meal. Is it to be wondered at? He will soon return to his right mind, I know; he has a good heart."

"He has been so unhappy!" That was Raoul's excuse in Madame Fauvel's eyes. She repeated that sentence to M. de Clameran again and again, whenever he complained of his nephew. And most as-

surely, when he had once begun he never ceased to complain.

"Nothing will stop him," he would groan; "a folly that comes into his head is a folly accomplished."

But Madame Fauvel could see therein no reason for reproving her son.

"We must remember," she would say, "that from his tenderest infancy he was abandoned to his instincts. He did not have, poor boy, a mother bending over his cradle to sow in his heart the seed of virtuous thoughts and noble sentiments. A father's firm voice never corrected the errors of his childish imagination."

"He is excusable, it is true, but he must change. Could you not speak seriously to him, madame, and try to obtain something from him?"

She promised, but she did not keep her promise. She had so little time to give to Raoul that it would have seemed a terrible thing to her to employ that time in unpleasant chiding. Sometimes she arrived with her mind fully made up to follow the marquis's advice, but had not the strength to do so when she saw Raoul; his glances melted her firmest resolutions; he spoke, and at his voice black care flew away.

But Clameran, as he was pleased to say, had certain fixed principles which would submit to no compromise. Gaston had died bequeathing to him the duty of watching over Raoul; he considered himself, he declared, as having his soul in charge. That was why, when he saw that his efforts did not arrest the imprudent youth in his disastrous downward career, he called upon Madame Fauvel to exert her influence. In the interest of her child's future, she should enter more intimately into his life, should see him every day.

"Alas!" replied the poor woman, "that is my most cherished ambition. But how can I do it? Have I the right to ruin myself? I have other children to whom I am responsible for my honor."

This response seemed to surprise the Marquis de Clameran. A fortnight earlier Madame Fauvel would not have mentioned her other sons.

"I will reflect," said Louis, "and perhaps, at our next interview, I shall have the honor of submitting a plan to you which will reconcile everything."

The reflections of so experienced a man could not be thrown away. He seemed much encouraged when he made his appearance on the following Thursday.

"I have reflected," he said, "and I have found what I sought."

"What is that?"

"The means of saving Raoul."

He explained his plan. As it was impossible for Madame Fauvel to see her son every day without arousing her husband's suspicions, she must receive him at her house.

The bare statement of this proposition was calculated to horrify a woman who had certainly been very imprudent, very guilty even, but who was the soul of honor. In her imagination she saw Raoul introduced into the sanctuary of the family, shaking hands with her husband, becoming, — who knows? — the friend of her sons; and all her honorable sentiments rose in revolt.

"It is impossible!" she cried; "it would be vile, odious, infamous."

"True," replied the marquis, pensively, "but it would be the salvation of the child."

But she had the courage to resist in this emergency. And she did resist, with an indignant vehe-

mence and energy calculated to discourage a will less firm than the Marquis de Clameran's.

"No," she said, "no, I cannot consent."

Unhappy woman! who knows what sloughs and quagmires lie before one when one departs from the straight path! She had said "never" from the very depths of her soul, and before the end of the week she had reached the point where she no longer spurned the project, but discussed the means of carrying it into effect.

So far had a cunning scheme led her on. Harassed, distracted, she struggled hopelessly between Clameran's politely menacing persistence and Raoul's prayers and cajoleries.

"But how, on what pretext, can I receive Raoul?" she said.

"It would be a very simple matter," said Clameran, "if we simply wished to admit him to your house as a stranger. I have the honor, myself, to be an habitué of your salon. But for Raoul we must have something more than that."

Not until he had tortured Madame Fauvel for a long while, had shattered her will and had well-nigh shattered her reason, did he definitely disclose his scheme.

"We have the solution of the problem in our hands," he said at last; "it is a genuine inspiration."

She realized from his tone that he was about to reveal his real purpose to her, and she listened with the piteous resignation of the condemned man listening to the reading of his sentence.

"Have you not a kinswoman at Saint-Remy," continued Louis, "a widow quite advanced in years, with two daughters?"

"Yes, my cousin Lagors."

"The very one. What is her pecuniary situation?"

"She is poor, monsieur, very poor."

"Precisely, and except for the assistance you send her secretly, she would be a pauper."

Madame Fauvel was surprised beyond measure to find the marquis so well-informed.

"What!" she faltered, "you know that!"

"Yes, madame, that and many other things beside. I know, for example, that your husband knows none of your family, and that he hardly suspects the existence of your cousin Lagors. Do you begin to comprehend my plan?"

She had an inkling of it at least, and was wondering how she could resist its consummation.

"This is my idea," continued Louis: "to-morrow or the next day you will receive a letter from your cousin at Saint-Remy, informing you that she is sending her son to Paris, and begging you to keep an eye on him. Naturally you will show the letter to your husband, and a few days later he will bestow a most cordial welcome on his nephew Raoul de Lagors, a charming youth, rich, clever, amiable, who will do his utmost to please him and will succeed."

"Never!" cried Madame Fauvel; "my cousin is an honest woman, monsieur, and will never lend her aid to this revolting comedy."

The marquis smiled with a most self-satisfied air.

"Have I said," he inquired, "that I proposed to take your cousin into our confidence?"

"But you must do it!"

"Oh! no, indeed! The letter which you will receive and show will have been dictated by me to the first woman I meet, and mailed at Saint-Remy by a trustworthy person. My object in speaking of your cousin's obligations to you was simply to show you

that in case of accident her interest will ensure us her assistance. Can you see any other obstacle?"

Madame Fauvel had risen, beside herself with indignation.

"There is my will," she cried, "of which you take no account."

"Pardon," retorted the marquis with mocking courtesy, "I am sure that you will yield to my arguments."

"But you are proposing to me to commit a crime, monsieur, an abominable crime!"

Clameran too had risen. All his evil passions were awakened and gave to his pale face a fiendish expression.

"I imagine," he rejoined with restrained violence, "that we misunderstand each other. Before talking about crime, remember your past. You were less fearful on the day when, as a young girl, you took a lover. To be sure, you denied that lover, you refused to accompany him when he had just killed two men and run the risk of the gallows for you. You had none of these paltry prejudices when you abandoned your child, after a secret delivery, at London. I must do you the justice to say that you seem to have forgotten the child absolutely, and that, although you were worth millions, you never tried to ascertain if he had bread to eat. Where were your scruples, pray, when you married M. Fauvel? Did you tell that upright man what sort of a brow your wreath of orange blossoms concealed? Those are crimes. And when, in Gaston's name, I demand reparation, you are horrified! It is too late. You ruined the father, madame; you shall save the son, or, by my soul, you shall no longer steal the esteem of the world!"

"I will obey you, monsieur," murmured the unhappy creature, vanquished, utterly cowed.

And a week later Raoul, now Raoul de Lagors, dined at the banker's house, between Madame Fauvel and Madeleine.

XVII

NOT without a frightful wrench had Madame Fauvel resigned herself to the necessity of submitting to the pitiless Marquis de Clameran's commands. She had exhausted all methods which seemed likely to soften him. Without a tremor he had watched her crawl at his feet. Neither tears nor entreaties could move that soul of mud. In desperation she had gone to seek assistance from her son. As he listened to her, Raoul had seemed to be beside himself with indignation, and he had left her, to go, as he said, and extort an apology from the villain who had made his mother weep. But he had presumed too far upon his strength. He had speedily returned, downcast, with gloom in his eye and his features distorted by rage for his own helplessness, declaring that they must consent, surrender, yield.

Not until then was the poor woman really able to sound the depth of the abyss into which they were dragging her. She had at that moment a sort of presentiment of the underground scheming of which she was destined to be the victim. And to this extremity she had been brought by a single sin, less than a sin, an imprudence, an assignation accorded to Gaston! Since then she had been struggling against the implacable logic of events. She had

passed her life fighting against the past, and now it was crushing her.

What a horrible weight oppressed her heart when she was obliged to show the forger's work, the letter from Saint-Remy, and when she informed her husband that she expected one of her nephews, a very young man and very rich! And what torture she underwent the evening she presented Raoul to all her family! And yet the banker greeted with a smile on his lips this nephew of whom he had never heard, and offered him his honest hand.

"*Parbleu!*" he said, "when a man is young and rich he naturally prefers Paris to Saint-Remy."

At least Raoul made it his aim to show himself worthy of this cordial welcome. If he had failed to receive the initial education, the education which family life alone can give, it was impossible to detect it. With a tact far beyond his years, he was able to distinguish the characters of all those about him with sufficient accuracy to succeed in making himself agreeable to one and all. In less than a week after his arrival he had won the good graces of M. Fauvel, had overcome the diffidence of Abel and Lucien, and had absolutely fascinated Prosper Bertomy, the cashier of the firm, who at that time passed all his evenings with his employer's family.

Forced to do justice to Raoul's cleverness, and recovering comparative tranquillity once more after the most distressing apprehensions, Madame Fauvel almost congratulated herself on having obeyed the marquis, and began to hope afresh. Alas! she rejoiced too soon. When Raoul, thanks to the social relations of his cousins, was made welcome in a social circle consisting of wealthy young men, instead of mending his ways, he led a more and more dissi-

pated life. He played and drank; he frequented the race-courses, and money slipped like sand through his lavish fingers. The young rake, whose acute sensitiveness was almost laughable in the beginning, and who desired nought from his mother save a little affection, harassed her incessantly now with requests for money.

At first she gave it joyfully, without counting, but it was not long before she saw that her generosity, unless she imposed some restraint upon it, would be her ruin. That enormously wealthy woman, whose diamonds were famous, who had one of the most superb equipages in Paris, was reduced to the most poignant of all the tortures of poverty, the imperative necessity of refusing to gratify the caprices of one she loved.

It had never occurred to her husband to keep an account of the money he gave her. On the day after her marriage he had given her the key to his secretary, and ever after she had taken what she deemed necessary, freely and without restraint, for the very considerable household expenses and for her personal needs. But for the very reason that she had always been modest in her tastes, so modest that her husband was accustomed to jest about it; for the very reason that she had managed the household with extreme prudence, she could not begin suddenly to use enormous sums without exposing herself to unpleasant questions.

Unquestionably M. Fauvel, who was the most open-handed of millionaires, would have been delighted to see his wife indulge in some huge folly; but follies are capable of explanation—they leave tracks. Chance might attract the banker's notice to the astonishing augmentation of the household

expenses; what reply was she to make if he inquired as to the cause?

And Raoul had squandered a small fortune in three months. Had it not been necessary to provide him with an establishment, with dainty bachelor's quarters? He was in need of everything, like a shipwrecked sailor. He had expressed a wish for a coupé and a horse — how could she refuse them? Then there was some new fancy every day. If Madame Fauvel ventured a remonstrance, Raoul's face immediately assumed a heart-broken expression and his lovely eyes filled with tears.

"True," he replied, "I am a mere child, a poor fool. I am losing my senses. I forget that I am poor Valentine's son, not the wealthy Madame Fauvel's."

His repentance was expressed with an accent that pierced the poor mother's heart. He had suffered so much hitherto! So that she always comforted him and made excuses for him at last. Moreover, she had imagined, with dismay, that she could see that he was jealous of Abel and Lucien — his brothers, after all.

"They," he would say, "they are very fortunate, who entered life through the golden door. They lack nothing, neither family affection nor social consideration; the future belongs to them."

"But what do you lack, unhappy child?" Madame Fauvel would ask in despair.

"I? Nothing in appearance, everything in reality. Have I anything that is my own, legitimately my own? What right have I to your caresses, to the comforts which you give me, to the name I bear? Have I not stolen my very life, so to speak?"

At such times she was ready to do anything so

that Raoul need have no reason to envy her two sons. She was determined to have one compensation at all events. Spring was approaching; she begged Raoul to find quarters in the country near her own estate at Saint-Germain. She anticipated objections; no. This suggestion seemed to please him, and he informed her, not long after, that he had hired a hovel at Vésinet, and proposed to have his furniture taken there.

"In that way I shall be nearer to you, mother," he said. "What a pleasant summer we will have!"

She rejoiced, especially because the prodigal child's expenditure would probably diminish. And in truth, she was so completely at the end of her tether that one evening, when he was dining with the family, she ventured, before them all, to address some observations to him, in the gentlest of tones.

He had been to the races the day before, had bet, and had lost two thousand francs.

"Bah!" said M. Fauvel, with the heedlessness of a man whose strong-box is full, "Mamma Lagors will pay; mammas were created and brought into the world to pay."

And, failing to detect the impression these simple words produced upon his wife, who had turned whiter than her lace collar, he added: —

"Don't you worry, my boy; when you need money, come to me, and I'll loan you some."

What objection could Madame Fauvel put forward? Had she not announced, according to Clameran's desires, that Raoul was very rich? Why had she been forced to lie for no purpose? She had something like a fleeting intuition of the snare in which she was caught, but it was too late to withdraw.

The banker's words had not fallen on deaf ears.

At the end of that week Raoul called upon his uncle in his office, and boldly borrowed 10,000 francs from him. Madame Fauvel wrung her hands in despair when she was told of this incredible audacity.

"In God's name, what does he do with so much money?" she cried.

For a long time Clameran had been seldom seen at the banker's house; Madame Fauvel determined to write to him, and request an interview. She hoped that that resolute man, who had so keen a sense of his duties as guardian, would move heaven and earth to arrest Raoul in his mad career, and would succeed.

When he was told of what had taken place, of which, he declared, he knew absolutely nothing, the marquis seemed much more disturbed and much more annoyed than Madame Fauvel. A scene of the utmost violence took place between him and Raoul.

But Madame Fauvel's suspicions were roused; she watched them, and it seemed to her—could it be possible?—that their anger was simulated, and that, while they bandied back and forth the bitterest words, even threats, there was laughter in their eyes. She dared not say anything, but that doubt, working its way into her mind like one of those subtle poisons which affect everything they touch, added new pangs to an almost intolerable agony.

And yet she did not think of blaming Raoul. She still loved her son madly, and the marquis was the one whom she accused of abusing her nephew's weakness or inexperience. She said to herself that, having fallen into the hands of such a man, she must be prepared for the most outrageous demands; and thereupon she strove, but to no purpose, to divine his object. He himself, however, soon disclosed it

to her. After complaining of Raoul more bitterly than usual, after pointing out to Madame Fauvel the pit that was being dug under her feet, the marquis declared that he could discover but one means of averting a disaster. That was that he, Clameran, should marry Madeleine.

For a long time Madame Fauvel had been prepared for all the expedients of a cupidity which she had at last detected. But, although she had renounced all hope of happiness for herself, although she had consented to sacrifice her life, she confidently expected, by means of her self-abnegation and courage, to assure the welfare of her family, endangered by her misconduct. So that Clameran's unexpected declaration inflicted a deep wound upon what sense of delicacy she had retained after so many crises.

"And you actually believe, monsieur," she cried indignantly, "that I will lend my aid to your detestable schemes?"

With a movement of his head the marquis answered: —

"Yes."

"In Heaven's name, what sort of woman do you think you are dealing with? Ah! I may have been very culpable long ago; but the punishment exceeds the sin at last. Is it for you to make me regret my imprudence so bitterly? So long as I alone was concerned, you found me weak, fearful, cowardly; to-day you attack my dear ones, and I rebel!"

"Pray, madame, would it be such a very great misfortune for Mademoiselle Madeleine to become Marquise de Clameran?"

"My niece, monsieur, has chosen her husband freely and according to her own inclinations. She loves M. Prosper Bertomy."

The marquis disdainfully shrugged his shoulders.

"A school-girl's fancy," he said; "she will forget him when you choose."

"I do not choose."

"Pardon me!" rejoined Clameran in the low, irritated voice of an angry man struggling to restrain himself; "let us not waste our time in useless discussions. Always, up to this time, you have begun by protesting, and you have eventually yielded to the excellence of my arguments. This time again, you will do me the favor to yield."

"No" replied Madame Fauvel firmly, "no."

He did not deign to notice the interruption.

"My reason for insisting upon this marriage," he continued, "is that it will rehabilitate your affairs and ours, which are seriously compromised at this moment. The money at your disposal is insufficient to supply Raoul's extravagant demands; you must have discovered that. A time will come when you will no longer have anything to give him, and when it will be impossible for you to conceal from your husband your forced loans from the housekeeping fund. What will happen when that day comes?"

Madame Fauvel shuddered. She could see the day of which the marquis spoke in the very near future.

He, meanwhile, continued: —

"Then you will do justice to my far-seeing prudence and to my intentions. Mademoiselle Madeleine is rich; her dowry will enable me to make up the deficit and to save you."

"I prefer to be ruined rather than to be saved by such means."

"But I will not allow you to compromise the safety of us all. We are associated for a common work, madame; do not forget that, — Raoul's future."

At these words, she looked at him with such a penetrating expression that his impudence was somewhat disturbed.

"You need insist no longer," she said at the same time. "My mind is irrevocably made up."

"Your mind is made up?"

"Yes. I am resolved to do anything, anything, you understand, to escape your shameful obsession. Oh, don't assume that satirical expression! I will go, if you force me to it, and throw myself at M. Fauvel's feet, and I will tell him everything. He loves me; he will realize all that I have suffered, and he will forgive me."

"Do you think so?" queried Clameran, mockingly.

"What do you mean? That he will have no pity on me; that he will turn me out-of-doors like an abandoned creature, as I am? Very well; I shall have deserved it. After the horrible torments with which you are killing me, there is no prospect capable of frightening me."

This unexpected resistance disarranged the marquis's projects so effectually that, in his exasperation, he ceased to put any constraint upon himself. The mask of the man of the world fell, and the knave appeared, revolting in his cynicism. His face assumed a most threatening expression, his voice became brutal.

"Ah! indeed!" he retorted, "you have decided to confess everything to M. Fauvel! A famous idea! it's a pity that it comes a little late. By confessing everything the day that I first appeared, you would have had some chances of salvation; your husband might have forgiven a fault committed long ago and redeemed by twenty years of conduct beyond reproach. For you have been a faithful wife, madame,

and a good mother. But consider what the dear man will say when you tell him that the pretended nephew whom you have introduced to his table, and who borrows money from him, is the fruit of your early love. However excellent M. Fauvel's disposition may be, I doubt whether he will be greatly amused by this practical joke, which indicates—make no mistake as to that, madame—a truly shocking perversity, rare impudence, and uncommon duplicity.”

What the marquis said was true, terribly true; and yet the baleful gleams that shot from his eyes did not make Madame Fauvel lower hers.

“*Peste!*” he continued; “it is clear that you think a very great deal of this dear Monsieur Bertomy! You do not hesitate between the honor of the name you bear and this excellent cashier's love affairs. Oh, well! it will be a great comfort to you, I fancy, when M. Fauvel separates from you, when Abel and Lucien turn their backs on you, blushing for shame because they are your sons, it will be very sweet to you to be able to say: ‘Dear Prosper is happy!’”

“Let the consequences be what they will,” said Madame Fauvel, “I will do what I ought to do.”

“You will do what I wish!” cried Clameran, losing control of himself at last; “it shall not be said ‘that an attack of delicacy on your part plunged us all into the mire. Your niece's dowry is indispensable to us, and, moreover, your Madeleine—I love her!’”

The blow was struck; the marquis deemed it prudent to await its effect. Thanks to his astonishing control over himself, he recovered his usual *sang-froid*, and added, with frigid politeness:—

“It will be well for you, madame, to weigh my ar-

guments. Take my advice, and consent to a sacrifice which will be the last. Think of the honor of your family, and not of your niece's love-affairs. I will come in three days for your answer."

"You will come to no purpose, monsieur; as soon as my husband returns, he shall know everything."

If Madame Fauvel had been less agitated, she would have detected upon Clameran's face an expression of intense anxiety. But it was only a flash. He made the careless gesture which says so plainly: "As you please!" and rejoined:—

"I believe that you are sensible enough to keep our secret."

With that he bowed ceremoniously and left the room, slamming the door behind him with a violence which betrayed the restraint he had been imposing upon himself.

In truth, Clameran had good reason to fear. Madame Fauvel's energy was not feigned.

"Yes," she cried, aflame with the enthusiasm of a great resolution, "yes, I am going to tell André everything."

But at that very moment, when she was certain that she was alone, she heard a footstep by her side. She turned suddenly. Madeleine came forward, paler and colder than a statue, her eyes filled with tears.

"We must obey that man, aunt," she murmured.

On either side of the salon was a small card-room, separated from it only by a tapestry portière. Madeleine, unknown to her aunt, was in one of these small rooms when the Marquis de Clameran arrived, and had overheard the conversation.

"What?" cried Madame Fauvel in dismay, "you know—"

"All, dear aunt."

"And you expect me to sacrifice you?"

"On my knees I ask you to allow me to save you."

"Why, it is impossible that you should not hate M. de Clameran."

"I do hate him, aunt, and despise him. He is and always will be, in my eyes, the lowest and most despicable of men; and yet, I will be his wife."

Madame Fauvel was confounded; she sought to measure the grandeur of this devotion which was proffered her.

"And what of Prosper, my poor child," she rejoined, "Prosper, whom you love?"

Madeleine stifled a sob that rose to her throat and answered in a firm voice: —

"To-morrow I shall have broken with M. Bertomy forever."

"No," cried Madame Fauvel, "no, it shall not be said that I allowed you, an innocent girl, to assume the crushing burden of my misconduct."

The noble and courageous creature shook her head with a melancholy air.

"It shall not be said," she rejoined, "that I allowed dishonor to enter this family, which is my family, when I was able to prevent it. Do I not owe you more than life? What should I be without you? A poor working-girl in some factory in my province. Who took me in? You. Is it not to my uncle that I owe the fortune which has tempted this villain? Are not Abel and Lucien my brothers? And the idea of my hesitating when the happiness of all of us is threatened! No. I will be Marquise de Clameran."

Thereupon a contest of generosity began between Madame Fauvel and her niece, — a contest the more sublime, in that each offered the other her life, and

offered it, not in a moment of excitement, but of her free will and after due deliberation.

But Madeleine, aflame as she was with the holy enthusiasm of self-sacrifice which makes martyrs, was destined to triumph.

"I have to answer for myself to nobody but myself," she insisted, realizing that that was the vulnerable spot at which she must strike; "whereas you, dear aunt, must answer for yourself to your husband and your children. Think of my uncle's grief if he should ever know the truth! It would kill him."

The noble-hearted girl spoke truly. Such had been the fatal concatenation of circumstances that Madame Fauvel had always been guided by what seemed to be a supreme duty. Thus, after sacrificing her husband to her mother, she now sacrificed her husband and her children to Raoul.

The difficulty is that a first misstep necessarily leads to others. Just as a tiny snow-flake becomes an avalanche, a mere imprudence may be the starting-point of a crime. From false situations there is but one way out: the truth.

Madame Fauvel continued to resist, but with increasing feebleness.

"No," she said, "no, I cannot accept your devotion. What will your life be with that man?"

"Who knows?" said Madeleine, affecting a hope which her heart was far from feeling; "he loves me, so he says; perhaps he will be kind to me."

"Oh! if I only knew where to get a lot of money! Money is what the man wants, nothing but money."

"But does n't he want it for Raoul? Is it not Raoul who, by his wild extravagance, has dug a pit which we must fill up? If only I could believe in M. de Clameran's sincerity!"

Madame Fauvel gazed at her niece with a sort of stupefied curiosity. To think that that mere girl, inexperienced as she was, gave convincing reasons for her self-sacrifice, while she, a wife and mother, had never obeyed aught save the instinctive impulses of her mind and her heart!

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I am wondering, aunt, if M. de Clameran is really thinking of his nephew. Has he or not a genuine purpose to assist him? When he has my marriage portion in his hands, will he not abandon both you and Raoul? More than that, I am tormented by a horrible doubt."

"A doubt?"

"Yes, I would tell you what it is if I dared — if I were not afraid —"

"Tell me," Madame Fauvel insisted, "let me know the whole of your thought. Alas! misfortune has given me strength. What have I to fear? I can listen to anything."

Madeleine hesitated, torn between the fear of wounding one she loved and the desire to enlighten her.

"I would like," she said at last, "to be certain, perfectly certain, that Raoul and M. de Clameran have not an understanding, are not playing parts agreed upon and learned by heart beforehand."

Passion is blind and deaf. Madame Fauvel had forgotten the laughter in the eyes of the two men on the day they seemed so furiously angry with each other in her presence. She could not, she would not believe that they were playing so detestable a comedy.

"It is impossible," she rejoined, "the marquis is really indignant at his nephew's conduct, and he is not the man ever to give him bad advice. As for

Raoul, he is giddy, thoughtless, vain, extravagant, but he has a good heart. Oh! if you could see him, if you could hear him, when I reproach him, all your suspicions would vanish. When he swears to me, with tears in his eyes, that he will be more reasonable, he means it. If he does not keep his promises it is because deceitful friends lead him astray."

Mothers always have had and always will have a grudge against friends. The friend is the culprit. But Madeleine was too generous to try to open her aunt's eyes.

"Heaven grant that what you say is true!" she murmured; "then my marriage will be of some use. This very evening we will write to M. de Clameran."

"Why this evening, Madeleine? There is no hurry. We can wait, delay, gain time."

These words, this persistent hope, this reliance on chance, on a chimera, on nothing at all, revealed Madame Fauvel's character and explained her misfortunes. Fearful, hesitating, undecided, she had never been able to form one of those unchangeable resolutions after which one refuses to reflect, to take any backward step. At the moment of greatest danger she closed her eyes, relying upon one of those miracles which never happen.

Entirely different was Madeleine's character. Her timidity concealed a fearless soul. When she had determined upon a sacrifice, she made it complete, absolute; she closed the door to deceitful illusions and walked straight on without turning her head.

"It is much better to have done with it, dear aunt," she said firmly. "Believe me, misfortune is much less painful in reality than in anticipation. Could you endure these alternations of sorrow and joy? Do you know what the anxieties you are concealing

have done to you? Have you looked at yourself within four months?"

She took her aunt's hand and led her to a mirror.

"There," she added, "look at yourself."

Madame Fauvel was only the shadow of her former self. She had reached that treacherous age when a woman's beauty, like that of a full-blown rose, withers in a day. In four months she had grown old. Sorrow had stamped its fatal imprint on her brow. Her temples, formerly as fresh and smooth as a girl's, were wrinkled, and threads of white silvered the black masses of her hair.

"Do you understand now," continued Madeleine, "why a sense of security is essential to you? Do you realize that you have changed so that it is a miracle that my uncle has n't been disturbed by it?"

Madame Fauvel, who thought that she had displayed superior powers of dissimulation, shook her head.

"Why, my poor aunt, did not I guess that you had a secret?"

"You?"

"Yes; but I thought — oh! forgive an unjust suspicion — I dared to think —"

She paused, sorely confused; and it required a great effort for her to add: —

"I imagined that perhaps you loved some other man than my uncle."

Madame Fauvel could not restrain a groan. Others might have shared Madeleine's suspicion.

"My honor is lost!" she muttered.

"No, dear aunt, no!" cried the girl; "cheer up and take courage; henceforth there will be two of us to struggle; we will defend ourselves and save ourselves."

Monsieur le Marquis de Clameran should have been content that evening. A letter from Madame Fauvel informed him that she would consent to everything. She simply asked a little time. Madeleine, she said, could not break with M. Bertomy between one day and another. Then too they must look for objections on the part of M. Fauvel, who was fond of Prosper and had tacitly consented to his suit. It would be wise to leave it to time to remove certain obstacles which they would be in danger of rendering insurmountable by attacking them too abruptly.

A line from Madeleine at the foot of her aunt's letter indicated her assent. Poor girl! she did not spare herself. The very next day she took Prosper aside, and, abusing her ascendancy over him, extorted from him the fatal promise never to try to see her again, and, furthermore, to assume the responsibility for the rupture. He had implored Madeleine to tell him at least the reason for this banishment which ruined his life; but she replied simply that her honor and happiness depended upon his obedience. And he left her with death in his heart.

Almost on his heels the Marquis de Clameran arrived. Yes, he had the audacity to come in person, to inform Madame Fauvel that, inasmuch as he had her word and her niece's, he would consent to wait. He realized, he said, the necessity for patience, knowing that he was not especially agreeable to M. Fauvel. Having both the aunt and the niece in his power, he was without anxiety. He said to himself that the moment would come when a deficit that it was impossible to make good would cause them to desire and hurry forward his marriage.

Now, Raoul was doing everything in his power to hasten that moment. As Madame Fauvel had gone

into the country earlier than usual, Raoul had followed and had taken up his abode at Vésinet. But the country did not make him more economical. Little by little he had laid aside all hypocrisy; he came to see his mother only when he needed money, and he needed it often and in large quantities.

As for the marquis, he prudently held aloof, watching for the propitious hour, and he owed to a chance meeting, some three weeks later, an invitation to dine at the banker's.

It was a large dinner-party and there were some twenty guests. The dessert had been served and the conversation around the table was becoming animated when the banker suddenly turned to Clameran.

"By the way, monsieur le marquis," he said, "I had a question to ask you. Have you any relations who bear your name?"

"None, monsieur; none that I know of, at least."

"I ask because I have known another Marquis de Clameran for the last week."

Sheathed in impudence as the marquis was, and although his wits were on the alert for surprises of all sorts, he was disconcerted for a moment and turned pale.

"Oh!" he faltered, with an energetic effort of the will, "a Clameran, — marquis; I am a little suspicious of the marquisate, at all events."

M. Fauvel was not displeased to have an opportunity to annoy a guest whose ostentatious pride of birth had sometimes irritated him.

"Marquis or no," he said, "the Clameran in question seems to me to be in a position to do credit to the title."

"Is he rich?"

"I have every reason to believe that he has a large

fortune. One of my correspondents has remitted me 400,000 francs on his account."

Clameran's self-control was marvellous. He had accustomed his face to give no sign of the movement of his mind. But this time the adventure was so strange, so surprising, it had such threatening possibilities, that his habitual assurance, his keen glance were not forthcoming. He fancied that he could detect an ironical tone, a curious expression on the banker's part, which made him suspicious. To those who had no interest in observing him he remained the same. But Madeleine and her aunt had detected his sudden start; they had surprised a swift glance at Raoul.

"I suppose that this new marquis is a merchant?" he said.

"Faith! you ask me too much. All that I know is that the 400,000 francs were paid him by ship-owners at Havre, after the sale of the cargo of a Brazilian vessel."

"So he has come from Brazil?"

"I don't know; but I can tell you his Christian name, if you wish."

"I should be glad to know it."

The banker rose and went into the salon for a morocco satchel marked with his monogram. He took a note-book from it and began to turn over the pages, muttering in an undertone the names written thereon.

"Wait," he said, "wait; the 22nd — no, that's too late — Ah! here we are; Clameran, Gaston. His name is Gaston."

But Louis did not move a hair; he had had time to collect himself and to lay in a store of audacity to parry any possible blow."

"Gaston!" he replied, carelessly; "I know now. This gentleman must be the son of a sister of my father, whose husband lived in Havana. On returning to France he probably took his mother's name, as being more high-sounding than his father's, which was Moirot or Boirot, if I remember aright."

The banker had laid his note-book on one of the tables in the dining-room.

"Boirot or Clameran, I shall have you to dinner with him before long, I fancy. Of the four hundred thousand francs which he has sent to me, I am to invest only one hundred thousand, and he wishes me to keep the rest on running account. So he probably intends to come to Paris."

"I shall really be very glad to make his acquaintance."

They talked about other things and ere long Clameran seemed to have entirely forgotten the banker's communication. To be sure, while talking as gayly as possible, he did not cease to watch Madame Fauvel and her niece. They were much more disturbed than he, and their perturbation was evident. They stealthily exchanged the most significant glances at every moment. Evidently the same horrible thought had passed through both their minds.

Madeleine seemed even more agitated than her aunt. For, at the moment that the banker uttered the name of Gaston, she had seen — she could not be mistaken — Raoul push back his chair and glance at the window, like the detected thief who looks about for means of flight. And Raoul, who was of a different temper from his uncle, had not recovered his countenance since that moment. Ordinarily a brilliant and original talker, he was utterly extinguished; he held his peace and studied Louis' demeanor.

At last the dinner came to an end, the guests rose to adjourn to the salon, and Raoul and Clameran managed to be the last to leave the dining-room.

They were alone, and they no longer tried to hide their anxiety.

"It is he!" said Raoul.

"I fancy so."

"Then all is lost; let us be off."

But Clameran, the audacious adventurer, was not the man to throw the helve after the axe until he was compelled.

"Who knows?" he muttered, while the knitting of his brow betrayed the effort his mind was making; "who knows? Why did that wretched banker not tell us where this devil of a Clameran is to be found?"

He paused, uttering a cry of joy. He had spied M. Fauvel's note-book on the buffet.

"Watch," he said to Raoul.

He seized the note-book, ran through it in feverish haste, and found this entry: —

"Gaston, Marquis de Clameran, Oloron (Basses-Pyrénées)."

"Have we gained anything," said Raoul, "now that we know his address?"

"It simply means that we are probably saved. Come, we must not let our absence be noticed. For God's sake, be cool; pull yourself together and be lively! There was one moment when your attitude might have betrayed us."

"The two women suspect something."

"Well! what then?"

"It's not healthy for us here."

"Was it any better at London? Confidence! we shall get out of it. I will go and set up my batteries."

They rejoined the other guests. But although their

conversation had not been overheard their movements had been watched. Madeleine had stolen to the door on tiptoe and had seen Clameran consulting the banker's memorandum. But of what use was it to be assured of the marquis's inquietude? She had long had no doubt of the infamous character of the man to whom she had promised her hand. He had well said to Raoul that neither Madeleine nor her aunt could rid themselves of his domination, whatever might happen, for, in order to do it, they must speak, confess.

When Clameran drove Raoul to Vésinet two hours later, his plan was made.

"It is he; I have no doubt of it," he said; "but we took fright too soon, my gallant nephew."

"Indeed! the banker expects him in Paris and we may have him on our backs to-morrow."

"Wait a moment!" interposed Clameran. "Does he or does n't he know that Fauvel is Valentine's husband? Everything depends on that. If he knows it, we have only to work our legs. If he does n't know it, we have no reason to despair."

"How are we to find out?"

"Simply by going and asking him."

Raoul made a gesture of admiration.

"That would be very pretty," he said, "but rather dangerous."

"It would be much more dangerous to stay here. As for running away on a simple suspicion, that would be altogether too idiotic."

"Who will go and ask him?"

"I."

"Oh! oh! oh!" said Raoul, in three different tones.

Clameran's audacity confounded him.

"But what about me?" he inquired.

"You will do me the favor to remain here. At the least danger I will send you a despatch and you can decamp."

They had reached Raoul's gate.

"So it's understood," said Clameran, "that you remain here. But, so long as I am away, you must be careful to be the best of sons once more. Take sides against me, slander me if you can. But no nonsense. No requests for money. Adieu! Tomorrow night I shall be at Oloron, and I shall have seen this Clameran."

XVIII

NOT without infinite difficulty and the greatest danger had Gaston de Clameran succeeded in making his escape, after leaving Valentine. He would never have found it possible to get aboard ship without the devotion and experience of his guide, Père Menoul.

Having left his mother's jewels with Valentine, his whole fortune consisted of 920 francs; and a fugitive who has killed two men can hardly pay his passage on board an outward-bound ship with such a paltry sum as that.

But Menoul was an old sailor and a man of expedients. While Gaston lay in hiding at a farmhouse in Camargue, Menoul went on to Marseille, and in the course of the first evening, by making the circuit of the wine-shops frequented by sailors, he learned that there was an American ship in the roads, and that her captain, one Warth, a seafaring man without foolish prejudices, would take great pleasure in giving shel-

ter to a stout fellow who would be useful to him at sea, without troubling himself about his antecedents.

Having visited the ship and drunk a glass of rum with the captain, Père Menoul returned to Gaston.

"If it were my case," he said, "I would snap at the chance; but you! —"

"What would suit you suits me."

"You see, you'll have to look alive. You'll be a regular seaman. And, to tell you the truth, the craft did n't seem to me one of the most Catholic sort, and the skipper struck me as a good deal of a bully."

"I have no choice," said Gaston; "let us go."

Père Menoul's scent had not deceived him. Forty-eight hours aboard the "Tom Jones" was enough to convince Gaston beyond the possibility of doubt that chance had thrown him into the midst of a remarkable collection of bandits of the worst sort. The crew, which had been shipped here and there, contained specimens of the rascals of all countries. But what did he care about the men among whom he was condemned to live for three or four months? It was his body alone that the vessel bore away toward new shores. His mind remained beneath the trees in the park of La Verberie, beside his beloved Valentine. What would become of her, poor child, now that he was no longer there to love her, to comfort her, to defend her?

Luckily, he had neither the leisure nor the strength to reflect. He did not feel that which was most horrible in his present situation. Compelled to serve an apprenticeship to the rough trade of a sailor, he found that all his energy was none too much to enable one who has not been accustomed from childhood to hard labor, to stand up under it. Therein lay his salvation. Physical fatigue allayed and be-

numbed mental pain. In the hours of rest, when, utterly exhausted, he was allowed to stretch himself out in his bunk, he slept soundly.

If he sometimes strove, with heartrending anxiety, to penetrate the future, it was during his watch on deck at night, when the weather was fine, when the sails required no attention. He had sworn that he would return within three years, and that he would return with sufficient wealth to satisfy Madame de la Verberie's demands. Would he be able to keep that reckless promise? Desire has wings, they say, but reality crawls slowly along on the ground.

Now, judging from all that he heard about him, he was not precisely on the road to the fortune he so earnestly desired. Perhaps the "Tom Jones" had cleared for Valparaiso, but she surely was taking the longest way to get there. It seems that Captain Warth proposed to visit the Gulf of Guinea. A black prince who was a friend of his, he said, was expecting him in the neighborhood of Badagri, to deliver to him, in exchange for divers casks of rum and a hundred wretched flint-lock muskets, a whole cargo of *ebony*. The fact was that Gaston de Clameran was a green hand on board one of those vessels which free and philanthropic America was then fitting out every year, by the hundred, to carry on the slave trade.

This discovery filled Gaston with anger and shame, but he was wise enough to dissemble his feelings. All his eloquence would not have disgusted the excellent Captain Warth with a traffic of which the profits exceeded a hundred per cent, despite the French and English cruisers, despite the deterioration of the cargo and a multitude of other things.

The members of the crew had a relatively high opinion of Gaston because the story of the blows

with the knife had been told by Père Menoul to the captain and had transpired. To allow his opinions to be seen would have been to place himself in an unendurable situation needlessly and to no purpose. So he held his peace, swearing inwardly that he would desert as soon as he should have a favorable opportunity.

The pity of it was that that opportunity, like everything that one awaits with impatience, did not come. After three months Captain Warth could not do without Gaston. Having detected his superior intelligence, he had conceived a warm friendship for him, made him eat at his table, took the keenest pleasure in listening to him, and compelled him to play piquet with him. And when, as it happened, the second mate died, Gaston was selected to take his place.

In that capacity he made two successive voyages to the Gulf of Guinea. It was as second mate that he assisted in shipping a thousand negroes in two cargoes, in "stowing" them, in looking after them during a voyage of from twelve to fifteen hundred leagues, and finally in landing them secretly on the coast of Brazil.

It was more than three years since Gaston embarked at Marseille, when, the "Tom Jones" having finally cast anchor in the harbor of Rio Janeiro, he was able at last to part from Captain Warth, an excellent man after all, who would never have been reconciled to that diabolical and revolting traffic in human flesh had it not been for his little Mary, an angel, for whom he wished to provide a magnificent dowry.

These voyages had, at all events, been profitable to Gaston. He had saved nearly 12,000 francs when he landed in Brazil. A proof that Captain Warth's

branch of trade was repugnant to all his generous instincts is afforded by the fact that he left him just at the moment when, having laid by a small capital, he might have made enormous profits.

But still he was no longer the proud and noble-hearted Gaston, sincere and innocent of evil, whom the little fairy of La Verberie had loved so dearly that she had abandoned herself to him. It is useless to deny the deleterious influence of certain environments. There are associations which eventually disintegrate the most solidly constructed characters. Just as the wind, the sea, and the sun had first tanned, then hardened his skin, so the society of his ship-mates and their conversation had first offended, then deadened the delicacy of his feelings. He had on his heart, so to speak, callous places like those on his hands. He still remembered Valentine, he still wished for her; but if she was still the best-loved woman, she was not the only one.

Meanwhile the three years within which he had promised to return had passed; but perhaps Valentine had waited for him. Before taking any step, he wrote to one of his friends who lived at Beaucaire and in whom he had every confidence. He thirsted for news of his country, his family, and his friends. He wrote to his father, also, to whom he had tried to send a letter whenever he had the opportunity.

Not until the following year did he receive a reply from his friend. That reply told him that his father was dead, that his brother Louis had left the province, that Valentine was married, and, lastly, that he, Gaston, had been sentenced to several years' imprisonment for murder.

This letter dealt him a crushing blow. Thenceforth he was alone in the world, without a country,

dishonored by a felon's sentence. With Valentine married; he could see no further object in living. He said to himself that he could never again believe in anything, since Valentine had denied him, forgotten him; since she had not had the strength to keep her oath, the patience to wait for him.

In his despair he almost regretted the "Tom Jones." Yes, he regretted the villanous crew of the slaver, his adventurous and exciting life, the dangers and triumphs of those reckless cutthroats who die lying on bags of dollars, or else twenty feet in the air, swinging from the yard-arm.

But he was not the man to allow himself to be crushed.

"I will make money!" he cried in a frenzy, "for money is the only thing on earth that never deceives."

And he set about making money, with the most intense zeal, sharpened every morning by a fresh supply of determination. All the means of fortune which the Empire of Brazil offers to adventurers, Gaston tried. He speculated in hides, worked a mine, and attempted to clear wild land, in turn. Five times he went to bed a rich man and awoke ruined; five times, with the patience of the beaver whose house the current sweeps away, he began anew to build up his fortune.

At, last after many long, terribly long years of struggle, he possessed nearly a million in property which he could readily turn into cash, beside vast tracts of land. He had said to himself that he would never leave Brazil, that he would end his days at Rio; but he reckoned without that love of the fatherland which never dies out in a Frenchman's heart. Having made a fortune, he longed to die in France. He immediately took the measures which his situation

demanded. He assured himself that, if he returned, he would not be molested, turned into cash such of his property as he conveniently could, entrusted the rest to a correspondent, and sailed for home.

Twenty-three years and four months had elapsed since his flight, when he stepped upon the quay at Bordeaux one fine day in January, 1866. He had gone away a young man, with his heart swelling with hope; he returned with white hair, believing in nothing.

Even his health, soon after his arrival, showed the effects of his tempestuous life and of a sudden change of climate. An attack of rheumatism floored him, and only after several months of suffering was he able to reach Les Eaux Chaudes, where, as his doctors told him, he would recover his health.

Once cured, he realized that inactivity would kill him. And as he had been captivated by the magnificent scenery of the Pyrenees, as he had fallen in love with the splendors of the valley of Aspe, he determined to settle there. A foundry was for sale, near Oloron, on the banks of the Gave, and he purchased it, thinking that he could find a way to utilize the enormous quantities of wood which were wasted in the mountains for lack of means of transport.

He had been established there several weeks when his servant, one evening, handed him the card of a stranger who wished to see him. He took the card and read: Louis de Clameran.

Not for many years had Gaston experienced such a thrill of emotion. All his blood rushed to his brain; he shivered and tottered like the tree struck by the axe. All the feelings which he believed to be dead within him burst forth with incredible violence. A thousand thoughts, too confused to be put in words,

crowded into his mind at the same moment, just as the words crowded to his lips.

"My brother!" he cried at last, "my brother!"

And leaving his servant bewildered, a little alarmed indeed, at his master's excitement, he rushed down the stairs.

In the vestibule a man was standing, awaiting him; it was Louis de Clameran. Gaston rushed up to him, and having squeezed him in his arms almost to suffocation, led him, or rather carried him into the salon. There he forced him into a chair, and seated himself in front of him, as near as possible, in order to see him better, to gaze at him more at his ease. He had taken both his hands and kept them in his.

"It is you," he said again and again, speaking very loud, as if to make himself understand better, to satisfy himself of the reality of what had happened, — "it is you, my dearest Louis, my brother, — it is really you!"

A mother does not give way more freely to her frantic joy on seeing her soldier son after a battle; the explosion of her delight is not more noisy. Gaston, whose life had been like a continuous hurricane, lost his self-control completely. He, the adventurer, the redoubtable Captain Warth's second mate, the seeker for gold in the mines of Villa-Rica, wept and laughed at once.

"I should have recognized you," he said to his brother; "yes, I should have recognized you. The expression of your face has n't changed; you have the same look, your smile is just the same as it used to be."

Louis was actually smiling, perhaps as he had smiled on that fatal night when the fall of his horse nearly delivered Gaston to his pursuers. He was

smiling, his face wore a happy expression, he seemed overjoyed. But it had required all his courage, all his strength of will, the consciousness of a terrible necessity, to induce him to present himself thus. One of those horrible pangs which turn a man's hair white seized him when he raised the knocker of Gaston's door. His teeth chattered with fear when he said to the servant as he handed him his card: —

“Take this to your master.”

And while he awaited the return of the servant, who seemed to him to be absent for centuries, he said to himself: —

“Is it really he? And if it is he, does he know, does he suspect?”

So great was his anxiety that, when he saw Gaston rushing downstairs with the impetuosity of the hurricane, he had been tempted to fly. If he had not uttered a syllable, if he had stood there dumb, congealed, petrified as it were, it was because he had been uncertain with what intention Gaston was thus rushing upon him. Now that he saw that Gaston was the same as always, — kindly, trustful, credulous; now that he was almost certain that no breath of suspicion had entered his brother's mind, his courage returned, and he smiled.

“At last,” pursued Gaston, “I shall no longer be alone in life; I shall have some one to love, some one who will love me.”

He paused, then inquired abruptly, with the lack of sequence of ideas characteristic of intense emotion, which destroys the equilibrium of the brain: —

“Are you married?”

“No.”

“So much the worse! yes, so much the worse! I would have been glad to find you married to some

excellent, devoted woman; I would be glad to know that you were the father of fine, handsome children. How joyfully I would have thrown my heart wide open to them all! Your family would have been mine. It must be so good to have a family, so pleasant. To live alone without a loved wife to share one's griefs and joys, one's trials and successes, is not living at all. What a melancholy thing to have only oneself to think of! But what am I saying? I have you — is n't that enough? Louis! — So I really have a brother, a friend, with whom I can talk aloud, just as I talk in undertones to myself."

"Yes, Gaston, yes, a dear friend."

"I should think so, as you're my brother. Ah! you are not married. No matter! we will keep house together. We will live as bachelors, old bachelors, happy as gods! we will enjoy ourselves, we will have our little spree. By the way! an idea! you make me younger; it seems to me that I am no more than twenty, that I am as strong and active as in the old days when I used to swim across the Rhone. But that was a long while ago, and I have struggled and suffered and aged terribly, changed cruelly since then."

"Aged!" Louis interrupted; "why, you have aged less than I have."

"What nonsense!"

"It is true, upon my word!"

"You would have recognized me?"

"Perfectly; you are just as you were."

Louis spoke truly. He himself seemed worn out rather than aged. But Gaston, despite his gray hair, despite his complexion, which had taken on a brick-red tint in the hot sunshine of Brazil, was still a robust man in the prime of life, in the full maturity of his manly beauty.

While a cunning smile wandered over Louis' pale face, ill-lighted by a pair of restless eyes, Gaston's glance fairly sparkled, and his face glowed with sincerity and candor.

"But how did you find me?" queried Gaston; "what blessed thought, what beneficent fairy guided you to my door?"

Louis had anticipated this question. During the eighteen hours he had passed on the railway he had time to lay his plans.

"We must thank Providence for our reunion," he replied. "Three days ago, a young man recently arrived from Les Eaux-Bonnes told me at my club that he had heard in the Pyrenees of a Marquis de Clam-eran. You can imagine my surprise. I wondered what impostor dared to assume our name. I hurried to the railway station at once, bought my ticket, and here I am."

"So you did n't think of me?"

"Why, my poor brother, for twenty-three years I have believed you to be dead."

"Dead! I, dead! Look you! did not Mademoiselle de la Verberie, Valentine, send you word that I was saved? She gave me her solemn promise that she would go and see our father."

Louis assumed the heart-broken expression of a man who feels obliged, against his will, to reveal a painful truth.

"Alas!" he murmured, "she sent us no word at all."

A gust of anger passed through Gaston's eyes like a lightning flash. Perhaps the thought came to him that Valentine had been happy to be rid of him.

"Nothing!" he cried, "she said nothing! She had the barbarity to let you lament my death, she

allowed my old father to die of grief! Ah! she had a terrible fear of the gossip of the world; she sacrificed me to her reputation."

"But why did n't you write yourself?" said Louis.

"I did write as soon as I could, and I learned from Lafourcade that our father was no more, and that you had deserted the province."

"I left Clameran because I thought that you were dead."

Gaston rose and walked about the room at random. He desired to shake off the melancholy that was creeping over him.

"Bah!" he muttered, "why bother my head over what is past and gone? All the memories in the world, pleasant or unpleasant, are not worth the faintest shadow of a hope, and, thank God! the future is ours."

Louis held his peace. He was not familiar enough with the ground as yet to risk a question.

"But here I am chattering away," continued Gaston; "I talk on and on, and perhaps you have not dined."

"I will admit that I have not."

"And you said nothing about it! Why, I have n't dined yet myself. The very first day, I was going to let you starve to death! Ah! I have a certain Cape wine."

He rang the bell violently; in a moment the whole household was astir, and, half an hour later, the two brothers were seated before a bountifully laden table.

Their conversation bade fair to have no end. Gaston wished to know everything that had happened since his departure.

"What about Clameran?" he said, when Louis had finished.

Louis hesitated a moment. Should he tell the truth or not?

"I sold Clameran," he said at last.

"Château and all?"

"Yes."

"I can understand it," said Gaston, "although if I had been in your place—our ancestors lived there, our father died there—" But, seeing that he made his brother sad, he continued: "Pshaw! the heart is where the memory lives, and not amid a parcel of old stones. Although I am what I am, I dared not return to Provence. I was afraid I should suffer too keenly when I saw Clameran again, and the park of La Verberie. Alas! I passed there the only happy days of my life."

Louis's face grew brighter. The certainty that Gaston had not been to Provence removed one of his most pregnant sources of anxiety.

At two o'clock in the morning the brothers were still talking. And the next day Louis invented a pretext for going to the telegraph office, and sent this despatch to Raoul:—

"Be wise and prudent. Follow my instructions. All goes well. Great hopes."

All went well, and yet Louis, notwithstanding his skilfully devised questions, had obtained none of the information he had come to seek. The expansive Gaston, who had told him his whole life, dwelling upon the most trivial incidents, had not said a word calculated to enlighten him. Was it chance or design, shrewd premeditation or simple forgetfulness? Louis asked himself the question with the uneasiness of evil-minded persons who are always inclined to attribute their evil-mindedness to others. At any cost, even though he were compelled to depart from his reserve,

he determined to set his mind at rest, and to penetrate his brother's intentions. The moment was favorable for his purpose, as they were just taking their seats at the breakfast-table.

"Do you know, my dear Gaston," he began, "that thus far we have talked upon every subject except really serious subjects?"

"The deuce! What's the matter with you, that you assume that prosecuting attorney's expression?"

"The matter is, my dear brother, that, believing you to be dead, I received the whole of our father's inheritance."

A hearty laugh from Gaston cut him short.

"Is that what you mean by serious subjects?"

"Certainly. I am responsible to you for your share; you are entitled to half—"

"I am entitled," Gaston interrupted him, "to request you, in God's name, to close that chapter. What you have is yours, by prescription."

"No, I cannot accept it."

"What? Our father's inheritance? You not only can, but you must. Our father wished to have but one heir; let us comply with his wishes." And, fancying that he could see a cloud on his brother's brow, he added gayly: "Upon my word, you must be very rich, or think me very poor, to insist in this way?"

Louis started imperceptibly at that point-blank question. What reply should he make to avoid committing himself?

"I am neither rich nor poor," he said.

"For my part," cried Gaston, "I should be almost enchanted to find you poorer than Job, so that I could share with you all that I have."

The breakfast was at an end. Gaston threw down his napkin and said as he pushed back his chair:—

"Come! I want to take you to see my — that is to say, our property."

As he followed his brother, Louis was as perplexed as possible. It seemed to him that Gaston avoided with strange persistency the confidential ground to which he tried to lead him.

Was his unreserve only a comedy then? Louis' distrust reawoke, he almost regretted his optimistic despatch of the previous day. But no trace of the troublesome thoughts stirring within him appeared on the surface. His face was calm and smiling, his voice cheerful.

He must inspect everything in detail, first the house, then the offices, the stables and the kennel, then the garden, of great size and well planted, with the Gave singing its mountain song over its pebbly bed at the farther end. On one side of a pretty field stood the foundry, in full activity. Gaston, who had not passed the enchantment stage of recent proprietorship, did not spare his brother the inspection of a file or a hammer. He told him his plans for the future, how he proposed to substitute wood for coal, and better still, to effect a greater saving by exploiting a wealth of timber hitherto deemed impossible to reach.

Louis approved everything; he applauded, but he answered only by monosyllables: —

"Yes! just so! very good!"

For a new trouble, which he must dissemble like the rest, was torturing him now. This prosperity, the evidence of which stared him in the face, drove him to despair. As he compared his brother's fate with his own, all the poisoned arrows of jealousy tore his envious soul. He saw Gaston rich, happy, honored, reaping the reward of his courage, while he — Never had he felt so cruelly the horror of a

situation which was his own work. The vile and shameful sentiments which had caused him to hate his brother twenty years before returned to him.

Meanwhile the inspection came to an end.

"What do you think of my purchase?" inquired Gaston, delightedly.

"I think, dear brother, that you own the most delightful estate that ever tempted a poor Parisian, located in the most beautiful country on earth."

"Is that what you really think?"

"Absolutely."

Gaston made a joyful gesture and uttered an exclamation of triumph.

"Very well, brother," he cried; "this estate is ours, since it is mine. Do you like it? Then do not leave it again. Do you really care for your foggy Paris? Settle down here, under this lovely Bearnese sky. The paltry, tawdry luxury of Paris cannot be compared to the pleasant, rich life you will find here. You are a bachelor, therefore you are free. Stay here, we will have everything we want. And for our hours of ennui we shall have the foundry, for we cannot do without some occupation. Between us, having ample capital, we shall do wonders. Does my plan suit you?"

Louis made no reply. A year earlier this proposal would have filled his heart with joy. With what transports of delight he would have welcomed the prospect of that attractive and luxurious existence! What blissful repose after so many scrapes! He could fearlessly have laid aside his adventurer's skin and become himself once more. But now he could not accept, and he knew it and was frantic at the thought. No, he was not free, he could not leave Paris. He had taken a hand in one of those terrible

games which are lost if one abandons them, and the loss of which may lead to the galleys. Alone, he might have disappeared; but he was not alone, he had a confederate.

"You don't answer," said Gaston, surprised at his silence; "do you see any objection to my plan?"

"None at all."

"Well, then, why not say so?"

"You see, my dear brother, that I should have nothing to live on without the salary of a position I have in Paris."

"And that is the only objection you have,—you who offered me half of our father's inheritance only a moment ago! Louis, that is unkind, very unkind; either you have failed to understand me or you're a cruel brother."

Louis hung his head. Gaston, albeit quite unintentionally, was turning the dagger round and round in the wound.

"I should be a burden to you," muttered Louis.

"A burden! Why, you are going mad! Have n't I told you that I am very rich? Do you imagine that you have seen all I own? This house and the foundry do not make up a fourth part of my fortune. I got them for a song. Do you suppose that I would risk in such an undertaking all that I've earned in twenty years? I have a round twenty-four thousand a year in government securities. And that's not all; it seems that my concessions in Brazil are finding a market; I am a lucky dog! My correspondent has already remitted 400,000 francs."

Louis felt a thrill of pleasure. At last he was about to learn how seriously his plans were threatened.

"What correspondent?" he asked with the most uninterested air he could command.

"*Parbleu!* my old partner at Rio. The funds are now lying to my credit at my banker's in Paris."

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"Faith! no. He was recommended to me by my banker at Pau, as a very rich man, prudent, and famous for honest dealing; his name—wait a moment—his name is—Fauvel, Rue de Provence."

Self-controlled as Louis was, and thoroughly prepared for what he was about to hear, his color changed perceptibly. But Gaston, engrossed by his own ideas, did not notice it.

"Do you know this banker?" he asked.

"By reputation, yes."

"Then we will make his acquaintance together very soon, for I propose to go to Paris with you when you return to arrange your affairs there prior to settling down here."

At this unexpected announcement of purpose, which, if carried out, would be his ruin, Louis had the strength to remain impassive. He felt that his brother's eyes were fixed on him.

"You are coming to Paris?" he said.

"To be sure; what is there so extraordinary in that?"

"Nothing."

"I detest Paris, and I detest it without ever having been there, which is stranger still; but I am summoned thither by important interests, by"—he hesitated—"by serious duties. In fact, Mademoiselle de la Verberie lives in Paris, so I am told, and I wish to see her again."

"Ah!"

Gaston had become thoughtful; he was deeply moved, and his emotion was visible.

"To you, Louis," he continued, "I can say why I

wish to see her. I entrusted our mother's jewels to her long ago."

"And you propose to reclaim them after twenty years?"

"Yes — or rather, no, I don't; that is a mere pretext to satisfy myself. I want to see her, because — because — because I used to love her — that's the true reason."

"But how can you find her?"

"Oh! that's a very simple matter. Anybody in the neighborhood of Clameran will tell me her husband's name, and when I know that — Indeed I am going to write to Beaucaire to-morrow."

Louis made no reply. When men of his stamp are suddenly brought face to face with an unforeseen situation, constituting a serious peril, they say as little as possible. They realize the influence which an apparently insignificant suggestion may have, and they avoid pronouncing a word until they have carefully considered its bearing and weighed its consequences.

Before everything Louis avoided any discussion of his brother's plans. To oppose a man's purpose almost always results in implanting it more deeply in his mind; each argument has the effect of the blow of a hammer on a nail. So he shrewdly changed the subject, and neither Paris nor Valentine was mentioned again that day.

Not until the evening, when he was alone in his room, did he look the situation squarely in the face and begin to study it in all its aspects. At first glance it seemed desperate. During the twenty years that had passed since he declared war on society and began to live on his presumption, deriving his income from the inexhaustible springs of human credulity and idiocy; during the twenty years

that he had been skirting the edges of the Criminal Code, Louis de Clameran had unquestionably had some difficult hours. He had been caught at the gaming-table with his hands full of marked cards; he had been hunted by all the police departments of Europe, obliged to fly from capital to capital under a false name; he had sold to dastards his address in handling pistol and sword; he had been arrested and imprisoned and had miraculously escaped. He had defied all sorts of dangers, he was afraid of nothing. His mind was capable of conceiving and elaborating the most criminal projects; he was capable of executing them in cold blood.

And yet, at this moment he was without ideas, and his customary confidence and impudence deserted him. Forced into a corner from which there seemed to be no issue, he was on the point of resigning himself to give up the struggle, to surrender.. Yes, he asked himself if it would not be wise to borrow a considerable sum from his brother and disappear forever. To no purpose did he rack his brain, his abhorrent experience suggested no scheme applicable to his present circumstances. He was destined to be crushed, fatally, inevitably, between events for which he had himself paved the way. If he questioned the future he saw naught but ruin and disaster. Danger threatened on all sides at once, — imminent danger, impossible to avert. He had reason to fear Madame Fauvel, her niece, and the banker; Gaston, on discovering the truth, would seek revenge; even Raoul, his confederate, would surely turn against him in case of disaster, and become his most implacable enemy.

Was there any possible means of preventing the meeting between Gaston and Valentine? Evidently

not. And the instant of their meeting would inevitably be the instant of his ruin.

Buried in his reflections, he took no heed of the flight of time. Daybreak surprised him leaning on his window-sill, allowing the morning breeze to blow upon his burning forehead, which seemed ready to burst beneath the effort of his thought.

"It is of no use for me to think," he muttered. "There is nothing to do except gain time and watch for an opportunity."

The fall of his horse at Clameran was, doubtless, an example of what Louis meant by an opportunity. He closed his window, went to bed, and so accustomed was he to danger that he slept. When he rose no wrinkle on his brow revealed the anxiety of the night. He was affectionate, cheerful, talkative, much more so than he had been hitherto. He suggested riding about the neighborhood in the saddle. Having suddenly become as restless as he had previously been quiescent, he talked about nothing but excursions here and there,

The fact was that he desired to keep Gaston's mind occupied, to amuse him, to divert his thoughts from Paris, and more particularly from Valentine. He was not without hope that in time, by exerting his utmost address, he could dissuade his brother from seeking a meeting with his former sweetheart. He intended to argue that such a meeting, absolutely purposeless in any event, would be painful to them both, embarrassing to him and dangerous to her. As for the jewels, if Gaston persisted in reclaiming them, why, Louis proposed to offer to take that delicate mission upon himself! He would promise to perform it successfully — and, in fact, he knew where the jewels were.

But it was not long ere he realized the emptiness of his hopes and his plans.

"Do you know," said Gaston one day, "I have written."

Louis knew only too well what he meant; was it not the ordinary subject of his meditations? However he assumed his most surprised air.

"Written?" said he, "to whom, what for?"

"To Lafourcade, at Beaucaire, to find out Valentine's husband's name."

"So you are still thinking of her?"

"Still."

"You haven't given up the idea of seeing her?"

"Less than ever."

"Alas! brother, you surely do not reflect that the woman you once loved is another man's wife and the mother of a family in all probability. Will she consent to receive you? Do you know that you are not going to disturb her whole life, to lay up for yourself the keenest regrets?"

"I am mad, I know that, but my madness is dear to me."

He said this in such a tone that Louis understood that his mind was irrevocably made up. However, Louis made no sign, was apparently engrossed by pleasure parties, but in reality passed his time watching for the letters that arrived at the house. He knew to a minute at what hour the postman passed, and he always happened to be in the courtyard to receive him. If he and his brother were both absent, he knew where the letters that arrived during the day were put, and he hurried thither immediately on his return.

His watch was not fruitless. On the following Sunday he noticed among the letters which the post-

man handed him one bearing the postmark of Beaucaire. He rapidly slipped it into his pocket, and although he was on the point of going out in the saddle with his brother, he invented a pretext to return to his chamber, for he was unable to control his impatience.

It was the letter he had been expecting: it was signed Lafourcade. It was of three full pages, and contained a mass of details absolutely uninteresting to Louis; but this is what it said concerning Valentine: —

“Mademoiselle de la Verberie’s husband is a very highly esteemed banker named André Fauvel. I have not the honor of his acquaintance, but I expect to call upon him on my next visit to Paris. I have conceived an idea which would make the fortune of our province; I propose to submit it to him, and, if he approves of it, I shall solicit the backing of his capital. You will not take it ill of me, I trust, if I use your name in introducing myself.”

Louis trembled like a man who has just escaped a great danger.

“If this letter had fallen into my brother’s hands,” he muttered, “there would have been nothing for me to do but strike my tent.”

But his ruin, although postponed, seemed none the less certain. Gaston would wait for a reply perhaps a week; then he would write again; Lafourcade, surprised at the miscarriage of his former letter, would reply at once; in the most favorable view, Louis had no more than twelve days before him.

“And that,” he said to himself, “is the greatest danger of all. Let that imbecile go to Paris and mention the name of Clameran to the banker, and it’s all over.”

In the hall below Gaston was waxing impatient.

"Are you coming?" he called to his brother.

"I am just coming down."

And he went down after bestowing Lafourcade's letter in a secret compartment of his trunk. He had fully determined now upon the project of a loan. With a round sum in his pocket, added to what he already possessed, he would go to America, and Raoul—faith! Raoul might get out of the scrape as he could. He certainly was distressed beyond measure at the failure of the most artistic scheme he had ever invented in his life, but the strong man does not inveigh foolishly against destiny; he derives the utmost possible advantage from events as they happen.

On the very next day, toward nightfall, as he was walking with Gaston along the charming road from the foundry to Oloron, he entered upon the prologue of a little story which was to conclude with a loan of 200,000 francs. They were walking slowly, arm-in-arm, about a kilometre from the foundry, when they met a very young man dressed like one of the mechanics who travel about France in search of work. He bowed to them as he passed.

Louis started so violently that Gaston felt the shock.

"What's the matter?" he asked in amazement.

"Nothing. I stumbled over a stone and it hurt me a little."

He lied, and the trembling in his voice might well have told Gaston that he lied. His reason for being so agitated was that in that young mechanic he had recognized Raoul de Lagors.

Louis was completely crushed. Surprise and instinctive alarm completely deadened, paralyzed his

audacious and talkative animation. He had nothing more to say. He continued to walk along the dusty road beside his brother, but he moved like an automaton, by the force of inertia. He seemed to listen, perhaps he did listen, but the words conveyed no meaning to his ear; he did not hear; and if from time to time he uttered an exclamation, a word of assent, which Gaston might take for a reply, he did it mechanically, by virtue of the surprising divorce that sometimes takes place between the mind and the brain.

He said: —

“Yes. That is so. Indeed! Perhaps.” But he had no knowledge of what he said.

While necessity, absolute necessity, kept him chained to Gaston's side, his thoughts darted in pursuit of the young man who had just passed them. How happened Raoul to be at Oloron? Why had he come there? Why did he disguise himself in a workman's blouse?

Louis had written to Raoul almost every day since he had been at Oloron, and he had received no reply. This silence, which had at first seemed natural enough, he now considered extraordinary, inexplicable. Had some unforeseen complication arisen in Paris? Was a mesh broken of the web in which he had entangled Madame Fauvel? Had Raoul been compelled to fly, and had he come to announce to him that the game was definitively lost?

In the next breath he asked himself if he had not been misled by a startling resemblance. Was it really his confederate whom they had met? And to think that he could not rush after the man and question him! His torture, the torture of uncertainty, increased momentarily until it became unendurable.

Luckily Gaston felt tired that evening. He suggested returning to the house earlier than usual, and as soon as they had returned he went to his room. Louis was free at last! He lighted a cigar and went out, telling the servant not to wait for him. He knew that Raoul, if it were really he, would be prowling about the house watching for him to come out.

His anticipations did not deceive him. He had not walked a hundred yards on the road when a man suddenly stepped out from a clump of trees and stood in front of him. It was quite light, and Louis recognized Raoul.

"What's the trouble?" he demanded instantly, unable to control his impatience; "what has happened?"

"Nothing!"

"What! Our position yonder is not in danger?"

"Not at all. I will say more—except for your unbounded ambition, everything would be going as well as possible."

Louis uttered an exclamation, one might almost say a roar of rage.

"In that case," he cried, "what have you come here for? Who gave you leave to abandon your post, at the risk of ruining us both?"

"That is my business," rejoined Raoul, as tranquilly as you please.

Louis seized the younger man's wrists with a sudden gesture, and, squeezing them until he made him cry out, he said in the hoarse, abrupt voice due to the imminence of danger:—

"You will explain yourself, I say; you will tell me the motives of this strange whim of yours!"

Without apparent effort, but with a muscular force

of which one would never have suspected him to be possessed, Raoul released himself from Louis' grasp.

"More gently, by your leave!" he retorted, in a most provoking tone. "I don't like to be treated so unceremoniously, and I have something with which to answer you."

As he spoke, he pulled a revolver half out of his pocket and pointed to it.

"You will justify yourself," said Louis, "or —"

"Or what? For God's sake, give up once for all the hope of frightening me. I propose to answer you, but not here, in the middle of this public road and in this bright moonlight; how do you know somebody is n't watching us? Come this way."

They crossed the ditch that ran beside the road and walked across the fields, heedless of the maize they trampled underfoot.

"Now," Raoul began, when they were at a considerable distance from the road, "I can tell you what brings me here, my dear uncle. I have received your letters, and I have read them and reread them. You chose to be prudent, I can understand that, but you were so obscure at the same time that I failed to understand you. From all that you have written me, a single fact stands forth clearly enough: we are threatened by a great danger."

"An additional reason, you rascal, for keeping an eye on the seed."

"Powerfully reasoned. Only, my dear and revered uncle, before defying the danger I insist upon knowing what it is. I am ready to expose myself, but I like to know what risk I am running."

"Did n't I tell you to have no fear?"

Raoul made the sly gesture of a Paris gamin laugh-

ing in his sleeve at the artless credulity of some worthy bourgeois.

"You mean, dear uncle," he said, "that I should have full and entire confidence in you?"

"Certainly. Your doubts are absurd after all I have done for you. Who went and hunted you up in London, where you did n't know which way to turn? I did. Who gave you a name and a family, when you had neither? I did. Who is working away at this moment to prepare a future for you, after making the present secure? I, always I."

Raoul had assumed an attitude of burlesque gravity as he listened.

"Superb!" he exclaimed, "magnificent, splendid! Why, while you are about it, don't you prove that you are sacrificing yourself for me? You had no need of me, had you, when you came and hunted me up? Come, go on, prove to me that you are the most generous and disinterested of uncles; you must apply for the Montyon prize for virtue, and I will endorse your application."

Clameran held his peace, for he was afraid of being carried away by his anger if he spoke.

"Come, dear uncle," Raoul continued, "let us drop this child's play. My reason for coming is that I know you, that I have just as much confidence in you as I ought to have. If it seemed advantageous to you to ruin me, you would not hesitate a second. In case of danger, you would escape alone and leave your darling nephew to clear his skirts as best he could. Oh! don't protest, it's quite natural, and in your place I would do the same. But make a note of this—I am not one of those who can be gulled with impunity. And with this let us lay aside useless recriminations and come down to business."

Louis realized that such a confederate as this could not be disregarded. Without further demur he described briefly and clearly what had happened since he had been with his brother. He was almost frank on all points with the exception of his brother's fortune, the size of which he attenuated as much as possible.

"Well! we are in a pretty mess!" said Raoul, when he had finished. "And you hope to get out of it, do you?"

"Yes, if you don't betray me."

"I never betrayed any one yet, marquis, understand that. But how shall you go about it?"

"I don't know, but I do know that I shall find some expedient. Yes, I shall find it, for I must. So, you see, you can go back to Paris again without fear. You run no risk in Paris so long as I keep watch on Gaston here."

Raoul reflected.

"No risk?" he said; "are you quite sure of that?"

"*Parbleu!* yes. We have too tight a hold on Madame Fauvel for her ever to dare to raise her voice against us. Even if she should learn the truth, the real truth, which you and I alone know, she would still hold her tongue, and be only too glad to escape punishment for her past sins, the blame of the world and her husband's anger."

"That is true," replied Raoul, who had become serious once more; "we have my mother, and she is not the one I fear."

"Who is it, then?"

"An enemy of your sort, O my respected uncle, an implacable enemy: Madeleine."

Clameran made a contemptuous gesture.

"Oh! that creature!" said he.

"You despise her, eh?" rejoined Raoul, with an accent of the most profound conviction; "well, I tell you that you make a mistake. She has sacrificed herself to my aunt's salvation, but she has n't given up hope. She has promised to marry you, she has dismissed Prosper, who is in a fair way to die of grief, it is true; but she still hopes. You think her feeble, timid, artless, don't you? You are wrong. She is strong, she is capable of the boldest ideas, and unhappiness will give her experience. She is in love, my uncle, and the woman who loves defends her love as the tigress defends her cubs. There is the danger."

"She has a dowry of 500,000 francs."

"True; and at five per cent that means 12,500 francs a year. "Never mind! if you are wise you will give up Madeleine."

"Never! do you understand?" cried Clameran, "never! I will marry her rich; I would marry her if she were poor. It is n't her *dol* that I want now, but herself, Raoul, just herself—I love her!"

Raoul seemed astounded by this sudden declaration on his uncle's part. He stepped back and threw up his hands, with every indication of unbounded surprise.

"Is it possible!" he exclaimed; "you love Madeleine!—you!—you!"

"Yes," rejoined Louis, in a suspicious tone; "what do you see that's so extraordinary in that?"

"Nothing, oh! dear, no! nothing at all! But this ardent passion of yours explains the surprising changes in your conduct. Ah! you love Madeleine! In that case, my revered uncle, there is nothing left for us to do but surrender."

"Why so, if you please?"

"Because, uncle, when a man's heart is caught, he

loses his head. That's a trite axiom. Generals in love have always lost their battles. The day will inevitably come when, being in love with Madeleine, you will sell us for a smile. And she is our enemy, and she is cunning, and she is watching us."

Louis interrupted his nephew with a roar of laughter too noisy to be sincere.

"How quickly you take fire!" he said; "you must hate our lovely, fascinating Madeleine very bitterly, eh?"

"She is the one who will ruin us."

"Be frank; are you quite sure you are not in love with her?"

Bright as the moonlight was, Louis could not see the angry flush that rose in Raoul's cheeks.

"I never loved anything but her dowry," he said.

"What are you complaining about, then? Don't I owe you half of the dowry? You will have the money without the woman, the profits without the burdens."

"I am not past fifty years old," said Raoul, with a touch of conceit.

"Enough," retorted Louis; "it was agreed between us, was it not, on the day that I came and lifted you out of the most horrible destitution, that I should be the master?"

"Excuse me! you forget that my life, my liberty, at all events, is at stake. Hold the cards, but allow me to advise you."

The two confederates continued for a long while to study and discuss the situation, and it was past midnight when it occurred to Louis that if he remained out any longer, he would run the risk of subjecting himself to some embarrassing questions.

"Let us not argue in the air any more," he said to

Raoul. "I am of your opinion. Matters are in such a state that we must make up our minds what course to pursue. But I cannot decide on the spur of the moment. To-morrow night, at the same time, meet me here; I shall have worked out a plan by then."

"Very good; until to-morrow."

"And no imprudence in the meantime!"

"My costume should, it seems to me, be evidence enough that I do not propose to show myself. I have arranged such an ingenious *alibi* at Paris, that I defy any one on earth to prove — judicially speaking — that I have left my house at Vésinet. I carried my precautions so far that I travelled third class, and it's terribly uncomfortable. Good-night! I will return to my inn."

With that he walked away, apparently not suspecting that he had awakened many suspicions in his confederate's mind.

During his adventurous life Clameran had managed enough "affairs" to know just how much confidence one should place in such accomplices as Raoul. Knaves, as is well known, have their own variety of "honor," and some people rate it higher than that of honest men; but this honor is never the same after "the job" that it was before. When the time for the division arrives is when difficulties arise. Clameran's suspicious mind already detected a thousand subjects of fear and of disagreement.

"Why," he asked himself, "did Raoul disguise himself so carefully to come here? Why this *alibi* at Paris? Is he setting a trap for me? I have him in my power, it is true; but, on the other hand, I am absolutely at his mercy. All the letters I have written him since I have been at Gaston's are just so much evidence against me! Can he be thinking of rebel-

ling, of throwing me over, of gathering all the profits of our enterprise alone?"

That night again Louis did not close his eyes; but in the morning his decision was made, and he awaited the evening with feverish impatience. So absorbing was his longing to be done with it, so intense the strain upon his nerves, that he could not succeed that day in being like himself. Several times his brother, observing his moody preoccupation, asked him:—

"What's the matter? Are you ill? Are you concealing some trouble from me?"

At last the evening came, and Louis was able to go and meet Raoul, whom he found lying on the grass, with a cigar in his mouth, in the field where they had conversed the night before.

"Well!" said Raoul, rising, "have you finally decided?"

"Yes. I have two plans, both of which I think are sure of success."

"I am listening."

Louis seemed to reflect, like a man who wishes to present his ideas as clearly and in as few words as possible.

"My first plan," he began, "depends on your assent. What would you say if I should propose that we abandon the whole business?"

"Oho!"

"Would you consent to disappear, to leave France, to return to London, if I should give you a handsome sum of money?"

"I must know the size of the sum."

"I can give you a hundred and fifty thousand francs."

Raoul shrugged his shoulders.

"My respected uncle," he said, "it pains me to see

that you do not know me, no, not at all. You play the fox with me, you dissemble, and that is neither generous nor shrewd. It is not generous because it is false to our agreement; it is not shrewd because — fix this firmly in your mind — because I am as clever as you."

"I don't understand you."

"So much the worse for you; I understand myself and that's enough. Oh! I know you, uncle, I have studied you with the eyes of self-interest, and they are sharp eyes; I have felt of the bottom of your bag. If you offer me a hundred and fifty thousand francs, it means that you are certain of pocketing a million."

Clameran attempted the indignant, protesting gesture of an honest man who is misjudged.

"You are all astray," he replied.

"Not at all. I judge the future according to the past. How much have I received of the money extorted from Madame Fauvel — often against my will? Barely the tenth part."

"But we have a reserve fund —"

"Which is in your hands, dear uncle, very true. So that, if the mine should be sprung to-morrow, you would save the strong-box, and I, for lack of money, should take a turn in the police court."

These reproaches seemed to distress Louis exceedingly.

"Ingrate!" he murmured, "ingrate!"

"Bravo!" retorted Raoul, "that is just the word. But enough of this nonsense; do you wish me to prove that you are deceiving me?"

"If you can."

"Very good. You told me that your brother had no more than a modest competence, didn't you? Now, Gaston has sixty thousand francs a year at the

lowest estimate. Don't say no. What is his property here worth? Three hundred thousand francs. How much has he in M. Fauvel's hands? Four hundred thousand. Total, seven hundred thousand francs! Is that all he owns? No, for the receiver of taxes at Oloron has been employed to buy *rentes* for him. You see that I have not wasted my day."

This was so clear, so precise, that Louis did not attempt to reply.

"What the devil!" continued Raoul, "when a man undertakes to command, he ought to make sure of his strength. You had, we had in our hands the most promising game imaginable; what have you done with it?"

"It seems to me —"

"What? that it is lost? That's my opinion too. And by your fault, by your very great fault."

"A man cannot control events."

"Yes, he can, if he's shrewd. Imbeciles wait for chance, clever men guide it. What did we agree when you came and hunted me up in London? We were to request my dear mother, very courteously, to assist us a little, and were to be most agreeable in our dealings with her if she yielded with good grace. But what has happened? At the risk of killing the goose with the golden eggs, you have made me torment the poor woman so that she does n't know which way to turn."

"It was prudent to act quickly."

"Very good. Was it in the interest of acting quickly that you took it into your head to marry Madeleine? On that day it became necessary to let her into the secret, and since then she has been advising and encouraging her aunt; she excites her against us. If she should induce her to confess to

M. Fauvel, or tell the whole story to the prefect of police, I should n't be at all surprised."

"I love her —"

"Bah! you've told me that before. But all this is of no account. You embark in an affair without studying it, without knowing anything about it. None but donkeys, my dear uncle, content themselves after a blunder with the stupid excuse, 'If I had only known!' They should have inquired. You said to me: 'Your father is dead.' But no, not at all; he's alive, and we have played our cards in such a way that I can't introduce myself to him. He has a million which he would have given me and I shall not see a sou of it. And he will go and look for his Valentine, and he'll find her, and then, good evening!"

Louis interrupted him with an abrupt gesture.

"Enough!" he said imperiously. "If I have endangered everything, I have found a sure means of making everything safe once more."

"A sure means! What is it?"

"Ah! that is my secret," said Louis, in a gloomy voice.

For more than a minute neither of the two spoke. And that silence between those two men, in that lonely spot, in the middle of the night, after the conversation they had had, was so horribly significant that they both shuddered. A ghastly thought had come to them at the same moment, and without a word, without a gesture, they understood each other.

Louis was the first to break the oppressive silence.

"So you refuse the hundred and fifty thousand francs which I offer you to disappear?" he began. "Reflect, there is still time."

"I have reflected. I am sure now that you will

not try again to deceive me. Between an assured competence and the probability of a great fortune, I choose the fortune, at all risks. I will succeed or perish with you."

"And you will obey me?"

"Blindly."

Raoul must needs have been very certain that he had divined his confederate's plan, for he asked him no questions. Perhaps he dared not. Perhaps he preferred doubt to a horrible certainty, as if he could in that way avoid the remorse of moral complicity.

"First of all," said Louis, "you will return to Paris."

"I will be there day after to-morrow."

"You will be more assiduous than ever in your attendance upon Madame Fauvel; nothing must be allowed to happen in the house without your being informed of it."

"That is understood."

Louis laid his hand on Raoul's shoulder, as if to invite his particular attention to what he was about to say.

"You have one way," he said, "of winning back your mother's full confidence, and that is to throw upon me the blame for all your past offences. Do not fail to employ it. The more odious you make me to Madame Fauvel and Madeleine, the better you will serve me. If you could arrange it so that their door would be closed to me when I return, I should be overjoyed. For the better success of our plans we ought, in appearance, to be at sword's points with each other. If you continue to see me, it is only because you cannot do otherwise. There is the theme, — it is for you to develop it."

Raoul received these, to say the least, singular instructions with the most surprised air imaginable.

"What!" he cried, "you adore Madeleine, and this is the way you select to please her? It's a devilish curious kind of courting. May I be hanged if I understand!"

"You don't need to understand."

"Very well," said Raoul, in a most submissive tone, "very well."

But Louis thought better of it, reflecting that no one can execute a mission successfully unless he at least suspects its object.

"Did you ever hear," he asked Raoul, "of the man who set fire to the house of the woman he loved, in order to obtain the right to embrace her?"

"Yes, but what then?"

"Why, at the proper time, I shall instruct you to set fire, figuratively speaking, to Madame Fauvel's house, and I shall rescue her and her niece as well. Now my act will appear the more noble to those two women, because they have despised and detested me. Patience would lead to nothing. A sudden revulsion of feeling, and I appear a veritable angel."

Raoul approved his uncle's plan with voice and gesture.

"Not bad," he said when he had finished, "not bad, on my word."

"Then everything is arranged?" said Louis.

"Everything; but you will write to me?"

"Of course; and if anything new should happen in Paris —"

"You shall have a despatch."

"And don't lose sight of my rival, the cashier."

"Prosper! — there's no danger from him. Poor fellow! he is my best friend now. Grief has driven

him into a path in which he will die. Really, there are days when I am strongly tempted to pity him."

"Pity him, if you choose; don't do violence to your feelings."

They exchanged a final grasp of the hand and separated, outwardly the best friends in the world; inwardly hating each other with all their strength. Raoul did not forgive Louis for having tried to fool him, to appropriate everything, when it was he, Raoul, who had triumphed over the greatest obstacles. Louis, for his part, was alarmed by the attitude assumed by Raoul. Hitherto he had found him devoted and submissive, as befits the lieutenant who marches to duty with his eyes closed, and lo! he was showing signs of revolt. The perspicacity of this nephew of his puzzled him and angered him; he was evidently to be compelled to render him a strict account of his acts, which had never entered into his calculations. Then, too, he was offended beyond words by the reproaches — exceedingly well founded he was compelled to admit — which had been heaped upon him. He had been wounded to the quick in his self-esteem as a shrewd rascal; he had been humiliated by a mere boy! So that, as he returned to his brother's house, Louis swore that he would have his revenge, and that, sooner or later, as soon as he ceased to need Raoul, he would find a way to create an opportunity to crush him, and would grasp it.

But for the moment he stood in such fear of his youthful confederate that he kept his promise, and wrote him at length on the next and following days. And, more than that, realizing how important it was to restore Raoul's seriously shaken confidence, he wrote with an absence of reserve otherwise inexplicable on the part of so cautious a man. The situation,

however, remained precisely the same. The threatening black cloud still hung on the horizon, but grew no larger.

Gaston seemed to have forgotten that he had written to Beaucaire, nor did he once mention Valentine's name. Like all men who, having worked much throughout their lives, cannot do without bodily exercise and activity, Gaston took the keenest interest in his new enterprise. The foundry seemed entirely to absorb his thoughts. It was losing money when he bought it, and he had sworn that he would make of it an investment advantageous to himself and to the province.

He had secured the services of a young engineer, an intelligent and progressive fellow, and already, by virtue of divers hasty improvements and changes of method, they had succeeded in balancing outgo and income.

"We shall pay expenses this year," said Gaston, in high glee, "and next year we shall make twenty-five thousand francs!"

Next year! — Alas! Five days after Raoul's departure, on Saturday afternoon, Gaston was suddenly taken sick. He had an attack of dizziness and vertigo, so severe that it was impossible for him to stand.

"I am familiar with this," he said; "I often had these dizzy fits at Rio; two hours' sleep will cure me. I am going to lie down; see that somebody wakes me for dinner."

But at dinner-time, when they went to call him, he was very far from feeling better. The vertigo had given place to a terrible headache. His temples throbbed with extraordinary violence. He had an indescribable feeling of dryness and choking at the throat. Nor was that all: his tongue refused to obey

his thought and led him astray; he tried to say one word and said another, as happens in some cases of dysphony. And, finally, all the maxillary muscles stiffened, and he could only open or close his mouth by a most painful effort.

Louis, who had gone up to his brother's room, absolutely insisted on sending for a doctor, but Gaston refused.

"Your doctor," he said, "will drug me and make me sick, whereas I simply have a slight indisposition for which I know the remedy."

And he bade Manuel, his servant, an old Spaniard who had been ten years in his service, prepare some lemonade.

The next day Gaston did, in fact, seem much better. He rose, and ate his breakfast with reasonably good appetite; but the same pains reappeared, with greater violence, at the same time as on the preceding day. This time Louis, without consulting Gaston, sent to Oloron for Doctor C——, who owes an almost European reputation to certain cures effected at Les Eaux-Bonnes. He declared that it was nothing at all, and simply ordered the application of several blisters with a few grains of morphine scattered over the surface. He also prescribed valerianate of zinc to be taken internally.

But about three o'clock in the morning, while Gaston was sleeping quietly, the symptoms suddenly changed. All the pains in the head ceased and were followed by a terrible oppression, so painful that the sick man could not obtain a moment's respite, but turned and twisted on his bed, unable to find a comfortable position.

Doctor C——, who came in the morning, seemed somewhat surprised, disconcerted even, by the change.

He asked if the dose of morphine had not been increased, to relieve the pain more quickly. Manuel, who had attended his master through the night, answered that it had not. Thereupon the doctor, after ausculting Gaston, examined his joints carefully and noticed that some of them were swollen and were becoming tender to the touch. He prescribed leeches, and sulphate of quinine in large doses, and went away, saying that he would come again the next day.

Gaston, as the result of a violent effort, succeeded in sitting up in bed; he ordered his servant to go and fetch one of his friends who was an advocate.

"What for, in God's name?" Louis asked him.

"Because I need his advice, brother. Let us not deceive ourselves: I am very ill. Now, only cowards or fools allow death to take them by surprise. When my arrangements are made I shall be more at ease. Let him do as I say."

It was not that Gaston felt ill, nor that his mind was affected in the slightest degree. If he had any presentiment of his approaching end, he allowed it to appear, without weakness or hesitation. He was one of those men who have defied death too often and have seen it too near at hand to fear it, and who are always ready to greet it without losing color. But he had made his will some time before, when, on his arrival in France, he had fallen ill at Bordeaux; and his affection for the brother he had subsequently found had changed both his ideas and his intentions. His reason for wishing to consult a lawyer was that he proposed to make a new will and to settle all his fortune on Louis.

The advocate for whom he had sent—a friend of his—was a man of small stature, well known in the province, astute and cunning, expert in all the arti-

fices of legality, as perfectly at home in the intricacies of the Civil Code as an eel in his slime. As he delighted to show his skill, he was one of those dangerous strategists who would sacrifice a portion of their fees for the pleasure of eluding a particularly positive provision.

When he had thoroughly digested his friend's intentions, he had but one idea, to carry them out as cheaply as possible by shrewdly avoiding the inheritance duties, which are always considerable. A very simple method occurred to him. If Gaston should admit his brother as a partner in his enterprises, acknowledging the receipt of a contribution equal to half his own fortune, then, if he should die, Louis would have to pay duties upon the balance only, that is to say, one-half.

Gaston adopted this fiction with the keenest delight. Not that he cared for the saving it would effect if he should die, but because he saw therein an opportunity, if he should live, to share all that he possessed with his brother, without offending his delicate sensibility. Articles of partnership between the two brothers were therefore drawn up, the partnership being stated to be formed for the purpose of carrying on an iron foundry; Louis having contributed five hundred thousand francs to the capital.

But Louis, whom it was absolutely necessary to consult, made a pretence of opposing his brother's project with all his strength.

"What is the use of all these preparations?" said he. "Why this beyond-the-tomb solicitude, on account of a slight illness which you will have forgotten a week hence? Do you suppose that I will consent to rob you in your lifetime? So long as you live, all that you have is mine, that is agreed;

and if you die, I am your heir; what more do you want?"

Vain words! Gaston was not one of those men whose feeble wills veer around for a mere nothing. When he had formed a resolution, after mature deliberation, he carried it out in spite of everything, even to its most far-reaching consequences, whatever those about him might do or say.

After a long and heroic resistance which brought into strong relief his noble nature and his rare disinterestedness, Louis, having reached the end of his arguments and being urged by the doctor, decided to affix his signature to the articles drawn up by the magistrate. And it was done. Thenceforth he was, in the eyes of the law and all earthly tribunals, his brother's partner, the possessor of half of his property. And that possession was final. Even if Gaston had chosen to change his mind, he could not do it, all the documents having been executed with the necessary formality.

Thereupon Raoul's confederate was agitated by the most extraordinary sensations. He almost lost his head, bewildered by the temporary delirium of those who pass abruptly, without transition, as a result of chance or accident, from poverty to wealth. Whether Gaston lived or died, Louis was the lawful, honest possessor of twenty-five thousand francs a year, even if no account were made of the probable profits of the foundry. At no period of his life had he dared to hope for or dream of such wealth. His ambition was not only gratified, it was surpassed. What would he lack thenceforth?

Alas! he would lack the possibility of enjoying that opulence in peace: it came too late. That fortune, which fell from the sky at his feet and should

have filled his heart with joy, filled it with gloom and wrath. The good fortune that had come to him — oh! bitter irony of fate! — was the most cruel punishment that he could imagine for his past life. And, far from admitting that he was justly punished, he blamed his brother for it. Yes, he held Gaston responsible for the horror of his situation.

His letters to Raoul for two or three days reflected faithfully all the fluctuations of his thoughts and the execrable sentiments that were working within him.

"I have an income of 25,000 francs," he wrote, a few days after signing the articles of partnership; "I have 500,000 francs of my own. The half — what do I say? — the quarter of that sum would have made me the happiest of men a year ago. Of what use is this fortune to me to-day? None at all. All the gold in the world would not remove one of the difficulties of our situation. Yes, you were right, I was imprudent, but I am paying dear for my precipitation. We are started now on such a steep incline that we must go on to the end, whether we will or no. Even to try to stop would be insane. Rich or poor, I can but tremble so long as an interview between Gaston and Valentine is possible. How separate them forever? Will my brother give up the idea of seeing the woman he loved so dearly?"

No, Gaston did not give up the idea of seeking and finding Valentine; his persistence was proved by the fact that he uttered her name several times in the midst of his most intense suffering. For he got no better. Despite the most energetic treatment, his symptoms alternated and did not disappear. The pains constantly shifted from the breast to the head, more violent and more unendurable at every attack. Toward the end of the week, however, the poor fel-

low had a respite of two days. He was able to leave his bed, to eat a few mouthfuls, and even to walk a little. But he was only the shadow of himself. In less than ten days he had grown ten years older. Illness, having a greater field in powerful constitutions like Gaston's, shatters them in a twinkling.

He who seemed, a fortnight earlier, to be in the very bloom of maturity and strength, was as weak as a child, bent like an old man. His legs would hardly support the weight of his emaciated body. Although it was midsummer and very warm, he shivered in the sun at midday. Leaning on his brother's arm, he crossed the fields to cast a glance at the foundry, and, sitting down not far from a furnace in full blast, he declared that he was very comfortable there and felt like a new man in that intense heat. He had no pain, his brain seemed to become clear, he breathed freely, and his presentiments of evil vanished.

"I am built of lime and sand," he said to the workmen who crowded about him, "I can pull through."

People from Oloron who came to call upon him hazarded the suggestion that perhaps his trouble came from a change of climate, and he was not far from believing it.

"Old trees die when they are transplanted," he would say; "I shall do well to go back to Rio if I want to live long."

What a chance of escape for Louis, and how he grasped at it!

"Yes," he replied, "you would do well, very well indeed. I would go with you; a voyage to Brazil with you would be a pleasure party to me."

But, as the old saying goes, invalids' plans are children's plans. The next day Gaston had very different ideas. He declared that he could never

make up his mind to leave France. He proposed, as soon as he was cured, to visit Paris. He would consult eminent doctors there, and there he would find Valentine. As his illness became more protracted, he thought more and more about her, and he was surprised that he received no letter from Beaucaire. The unaccountable delay preoccupied him to such a degree that he wrote again in more urgent terms, requesting a line by return mail. This second letter Lafourcade never received.

That same evening Gaston began to complain once more. The two or three days of improvement were simply a halting of the disease. It resumed its course with incredible severity and violence, and for the first time Doctor C—— betrayed some uneasiness. From that moment, in truth, a fatal termination seemed inevitable. Although Gaston's suffering apparently decreased and he complained less, it was because his strength was also decreasing and death was at hand. The heart-beats slackened in force from hour to hour, and the extremities became cold.

At last, on the fourteenth day of his illness, in the morning, Gaston, who had passed the night in a most disquieting stupor, seemed to recover some animation. He sent for a priest and remained alone with him about half an hour, declaring that he died a Christian, like his ancestors. Then he ordered all the doors of his bedroom to be thrown open and the workmen to be admitted. He bade them adieu and told them that he had provided for their future.

When they had retired, he made his brother promise to keep the foundry, embraced him for the last time, and, falling back upon his pillow, died just as the clock struck twelve, quietly and without convulsions.

Thenceforth Louis was really Marquis de Clameran, and he was a millionaire. A fortnight later, however, having put all his affairs in order and made a bargain with the engineer who managed the foundry, he took the train for Paris. On the preceding day he had sent to Raoul this pregnant despatch: —

“I am coming.”

XIX

FAITHFUL to the programme marked out for him by his confederate, while Louis de Clameran was on guard at Oloron, Raoul, in Paris, strove to reconquer Madame Fauvel's heart, to regain her confidence, which she had withdrawn from him, — in a word, to reassure her. It was a difficult, but not impossible task. Madame Fauvel had been profoundly distressed by Raoul's follies and dismayed by his persistent demands; but she had not ceased to love him. Whatever he had done, whatever he might do, he remained the child of her first love, the living souvenir of the comely and noble-hearted Gaston, who had been the master of her heart and her thoughts.

She adored her two sons, Abel and Lucien; but she could not resist an indulgent weakness for the poor boy who had been torn from her arms long before, abandoned to the care of hirelings and deprived of a mother's caresses and of the joys of home. She blamed herself for her early misconduct, and in her conscience accepted the responsibility therefor, saying to herself: “It is the result of my sin, my very great sin!”

These feelings Raoul had carefully studied, in order to prepare himself to trade upon them. And it must be confessed that more irresistible seductions were never at the command of a more detestable perversity. Beneath a delightfully innocent exterior that precocious knave concealed an extraordinary faculty of observation. He could at his pleasure assume all the charms of youth and display the pleasing traits of innocence. Even angels would have been deceived, and would have loved to gaze at their own reflections in his lovely, limpid eyes. His voice, manly and cajoling by turns, assumed the soft tone or the vibrating quality which touches and agitates women.

During the month of Louis' absence, he enchanted Madame Fauvel by affording her blissful delights of which she had no conception. Never had that mother, so genuinely innocent despite the disasters which a single misstep had brought upon her, dreamed of such bliss. Her love for her son agitated her like an adulterous passion; it was marked by all the violence, the excitement, the mystery of such a passion. For her he displayed what sons seldom display—the coquetry, the assiduity, the idolatry of a young lover.

As she was living in the country, and as M. Fauvel went into Paris in the morning, thus leaving her days at her disposal, she passed them with Raoul in his house at Vésinet. And often, as she found that she could never have enough of looking at him and listening to him, she insisted upon his going home to dinner and to pass the evening with her. She forgave all his past shortcomings, or rather she attributed them to Clameran, whom she knew to be absent.

“Now that Raoul no longer has his uncle's detes-

table advice to guide him," she said to herself, "he shows himself as he really is, noble, generous, and affectionate, like his father."

This life of falsehood did not bore Raoul. He took an actor's interest in the part he was playing. He possessed the faculty which makes knaves illustrious; he was the dupe of his own impostures. At certain moments he actually did not know whether he was telling the truth or acting an infamous comedy. But what success crowned his efforts! Even Madeleine, the prudent and suspicious Madeleine, while she did not absolutely change her opinion of the young adventurer, admitted that she had perhaps been unjust to him, through trusting overmuch to appearances.

The subject of money had not been mentioned again. This exemplary son lived on nothing at all. Thus, when Louis arrived from Oloron, having had time to form and mature a plan of campaign, Raoul had triumphed.

Although he was now very wealthy, Louis had determined to make no change for the present in his mode of life, at least in appearance. He took up his abode at the Hôtel du Louvre as before. His only new expense was a carriage, driven by Gaston's former servant, Manuel, who had consented to remain in his service, although a legacy from his late master, while it had not made him a rich man, had placed him beyond want.

Louis' dream, the goal of his ambition and of his efforts, was to take his place among the great manufacturers of France. He paraded his trade of iron-master much more proudly than his title of marquis. The fact was that he had rubbed elbows during his adventurous life with so many *table d'hôte* barons

and dukes of the green-cloth that he had come to have but little faith in the prestige of the nobility. How could one distinguish the false from the true? He said to himself that a thing that is so easy to obtain has no great value. By dint of having experimented at his own expense, he knew that an unromantic generation attaches a value to coats of arms only to the extent that their possessors are able to exhibit them on fine carriages. One may be a marquis without a marquise, but one can be an iron-master only on condition of having an iron-foundry.

Louis thirsted now for public esteem. All the humiliation of his life, ill-digested, lay heavy on his stomach. He had suffered so much, he had endured so much contemptuous treatment, his cheeks had tingled under so many blows, that he burned with the longing for revenge. He desired an honored old age, after the most ignominious of lives. His past disturbed him little. He knew the world well enough to know that the rumble of his carriage wheels would drown the hooting of those who might have known him formerly.

Such were the thoughts which fermented in Louis' brain during the twenty hours that he passed on the railway, between Pau and Paris. The thought of Raoul disturbed him not at all; he still needed him, he had decided to make use of his cleverness, and then either to get rid of him at the cost of a great sacrifice or to attach him to his fortunes. Traces of all these ideas are found in a notebook Louis carried with him during his journey.

The first interview between the confederates took place at the Hôtel du Louvre. Everything tends to prove that it was a stormy one. Raoul—a practical youth—maintained that they ought to deem them-

selves most fortunate to have obtained what they had, and that to seek greater profits would be madness.

"What do we lack?" he asked his uncle—and he wrote a few days later: "What have we to wish for? We own more than a million, let us divide and let the thing drop. We have been very lucky; take my advice and let us not tempt fortune."

But this moderation was distasteful to Louis.

"I am rich," he replied, "but I have other ambitions. I am more than ever determined to marry Madeleine. Oh! I have sworn that she shall be mine. In the first place, I love her; in the second place, by becoming the nephew of one of the richest bankers in the capital, I immediately acquire considerable importance."

"To follow up Madeleine, uncle, is to run great risks."

"Very good! I choose to run them. It is my purpose to divide with you, but I will not divide until the day after my marriage. Madeleine's dowry will be your share."

Raoul made no reply to this; Clameran had the money and was master of the situation.

"You are afraid of nothing," he said in a discontented tone; "have you ever reflected how you will explain your new fortune? Every one at M. Fauvel's knows that a Clameran whom you did not know—you said so yourself—was living at Oloron; indeed, he had funds on deposit with the house. What will you say when they ask you who this Clameran was and how you happen to be his residuary legatee?"

Louis shrugged his shoulders.

"By dint of trying to be very shrewd, my dear nephew," he sneered, "you arrive at artless innocence."

"Explain, explain!"

"Very easily, I assure you! For the benefit of the banker and his wife and Madeleine, the Clameran of Oloron will be a natural son of my father—consequently my brother—who was born at Hamburg and acknowledged during the emigration. Can anything be more natural than that he should choose to enrich our family? This is the story you will tell your honored mother to-morrow."

"It is very bold."

"Wherein?"

"They may make inquiries,"

"Who? the banker? For what purpose? What does he care whether I have a natural brother or not? I am the heir, my papers are in proper form, he pays me, and that's the end of it."

"So far as he is concerned, yes."

"Do you fancy, in God's name, that Madame Fauvel and her niece will start on this trail? What for? Have they a suspicion? No. Moreover, the slightest movement may compromise them. Even when they know our secrets, I am not afraid of them, for they can't make any use of them."

Raoul reflected, seeking objections and finding none.

"All right!" he said; "I will do as you say; but I need not rely on Madame Fauvel's purse now."

"Why not, I pray to know?"

"Why, deuce take it, uncle, now that you are rich—"

"Well! what has that to do with it?" cried Louis, triumphantly. "Are n't we at swords' points? Have n't you said enough ill of me to justify you in refusing aid from me? I tell you, I anticipated everything, and when I have explained my plan to you, you will say with me: 'We shall succeed!'"

Louis de Clameran's plan was of the simplest, and for that very reason, unfortunately, had an excellent chance of success.

"Come," he began, "let us figure up and draw our balance sheet. You may not have understood our manœuvres hitherto, monsieur my nephew, so I propose to explain them to you."

"I am listening."

"I first presented myself to Madame Fauvel, saying, not 'Your money or your life!' which is nothing at all, but 'Your money or your honor!' It was a hard blow. I frightened her, as I expected, and I inspired a most profound repulsion in her."

"Repulsion is a feeble word, dear uncle."

"I know it. Then it was that, having sought and found you, I introduced you on the stage. Ah! I don't wish to flatter you, but you won a mighty triumph at the first stroke. I was present, hiding behind a portière, at your first interview; you were simply sublime. She saw you and loved you; you spoke and you were the master of her heart."

"And but for you —"

"Let me have my say. That was the first act of our comedy. I pass to the second, — your dissipated habits, your extravagance, — a grandfather would say reckless extravagance, — soon changed our respective situations. Madame Fauvel, without ceasing to adore you — you are so like Gaston! — was afraid of you; so afraid that she threw herself into my arms, that she submitted to the necessity of applying to me, that she asked my aid."

"Poor woman!"

"I came out very strong, you must admit, at that crisis. I was serious, cold, paternal, avuncular, indignant, but deeply moved. The ancient probity of

the Clamerans spoke nobly through my mouth. I stigmatized your culpable conduct as it deserved. During that period I triumphed at your expense. Madame Fauvel, abandoning her first impressions, loved me, esteemed me, blessed me."

"That time is far away."

Louis did not deign to notice his nephew's sarcastic interruption.

"We come now," he continued, "to the third phase, during which Madame Fauvel, with Madeleine to advise her, came very near judging us at our real value. Oh! don't make any mistake about that; she suspected and despised us equally. If she did not begin to hate you with all her strength, it was only because a mother's heart, Raoul, especially in Madame Fauvel's position, contains a store of indulgence and pardon to make the good Lord jealous. Only a mother can despise and adore her son at the same time."

"Although she did not tell me that outright, she hinted it in such terms that — yes, I — was moved."

"*Parbleu!* and so was I! However, that is where we stood. Madame Fauvel was trembling; Madeleine, sacrificing herself, had dismissed Prosper, and consented to marry me, when Gaston's existence was suddenly sprung upon us. Since then what has happened? You have succeeded in making yourself whiter than the immaculate snow in Madame Fauvel's eyes, and you have made me blacker than hell. She has resumed her admiration of your noble qualities, and in her eyes and Madeleine's it was my baleful influence that led you into evil."

"As you say, revered uncle, that is where we stand."

"Very good; now we approach the fifth act; con-

sequently a new turn-about is indispensable to the success of our play."

"A new turn-about —"

"Seems a little difficult to you, does n't it? But nothing can be simpler. Just listen to me carefully, for the future depends on your skill."

Raoul, in his arm-chair, assumed the attitude of an auditor ready for anything, and said simply: —

"I am entirely at your service."

"To-morrow, then," continued Louis, "you will go to Madame Fauvel and tell her the story we have agreed upon with reference to Gaston. She won't believe you, but no matter. The important thing is that you yourself should seem to place the most implicit faith in it."

"I will be convinced."

"Within four or five days I will see M. Fauvel, and confirm the advices he should have received from my notary at Oloron, namely, that the funds deposited with him belong to me. I will repeat for his benefit the fable of the natural brother, and I will ask him to be kind enough to keep the money, for which I have no use. You are suspicion personified, my dear nephew, and this deposit will be a pledge of my sincerity."

"We will talk of that again."

"Next, my dear nephew, I shall go to Madame Fauvel and say to her something like this: 'Being very poor, dear madame, I was compelled to lay upon you the obligation to come to the assistance of my brother's son, who is your son as well. That boy is a scoundrel —'"

"Thanks, uncle!"

"He has caused you innumerable anxieties; he has poisoned your life, which it was his duty to

brighten; accept my apologies, and believe in the sincerity of my regrets. To-day I am rich, and I have come to inform you that I propose henceforth to take upon myself alone the whole burden of Raoul's present and future.'"

"And that's what you call a plan?"

"*Parbleu!* yes, as you'll see. At that announcement it is probable that Madame Fauvel will feel an impulse to throw herself upon my neck. She will not do it, however, restrained as she will be by the thought of her niece; she will ask me whether, now that I am rich, I will not give up Madeleine. To which I shall answer squarely: 'No!' Indeed, there will be an opportunity for a beautiful outburst of disinterestedness.—'You may have thought me avaricious, madame, you were wrong. I have been fascinated, as every man must be, by the grace and charm, the wit and beauty of Mademoiselle Madeleine, and—I love her. If she had not a sou, on my knees I would ask you for her hand, with even greater ardor. It was agreed that she shall be my wife, allow me to insist upon that one article of our treaty. I ask that price for my silence. And, to show you that her dowry is of no consequence in my eyes, on the day following my marriage, I will hand Raoul government securities worth 25,000 francs a year.'"

Louis expressed himself in such a persuasive voice and accent that Raoul, an artist in knavery, first of all, was moved to admiration.

"Splendid!" he cried, "that last sentence may dig a pit between Madame Fauvel and her niece. This assurance of a fortune for me may bring my mother over to our side."

"I hope so," rejoined Louis, with an air of false modesty, "and I have the more reason to hope so,

because I shall supply the dear lady with some excellent arguments to excuse herself in her own eyes. For, you see, when you suggest to an upright person some little — what shall I call it? — transaction, you must offer at the same time some justifying arguments to set the conscience at rest. That's the way the devil works. I will prove to Madame Fauvel and her niece that Prosper has deceived them shamefully. I will describe that fellow to them as overburdened with debt, buried in debauchery, gambling, feasting, and, to cap the climax, living openly with an abandoned woman."

"And a pretty one, to boot! Don't forget to say that Señora Gypsy is a fascinating creature; say that she's adorable; that will be the last straw."

"Never fear; I will be as eloquent and moral as the law itself. Then I will impress upon Madame Fauvel that, if she really loves her niece, she ought to wish for her marriage, not to that paltry cashier, a penniless employé, but to a man of weight, a great manufacturer, heir to one of the great names of France, a marquis, eligible to the most exalted posts, and, lastly, rich enough to give you a standing in society."

Raoul himself yielded to the allurements of these prospects.

"If you do not convince her," he said, "you will make her hesitate."

"Oh! I don't expect a sudden change. This is only a seed which I shall plant in her mind; thanks to you, it will develop, flourish, and bear its fruit."

"Thanks to me?"

"Yes, let me finish. When I have said all this, I disappear, I do not show my face again, and your part begins. Of course your mother will repeat our

conversation to you, and by her manner we shall be able to judge of the effect produced. But you must take fire at the idea of accepting anything from me. Assert vehemently that you are ready to defy all manner of privations, poverty—say hunger while you are about it—rather than receive anything under heaven from a man whom you hate—from a man who—from a man whose—can't you see the scene now?"

"I can see it and feel it. In pathetic parts I am always very fine, when I have had time to prepare myself."

"Good. But this noble disinterestedness will not prevent your suddenly renewing your dissipated habits. You will gamble and bet and lose more than ever. You will need money, and more money; you will be urgent, pitiless. And understand that I shall not call upon you to account for any part of what you extort from her; it will be your own."

"The devil, if that's the way it is—"

"You'll go ahead, won't you?"

"Yes, and quickly, I promise you."

"That's what I want, Raoul. Within three months you must have exhausted all the resources—all, you understand!—of those two women. You must bring them to a point where they will not know which way to turn. I desire that in three months they shall be absolutely ruined, without money, without a jewel, without anything."

Louis de Clameran spoke with such animation, with a passionate vehemence so surprising after the exposition of his plan, that Raoul was thunder-struck.

"You must hate these unfortunate women very bitterly?" he suggested.

"Hate them!" cried Louis, and his eyes flashed; "I, hate them! Why, don't you see, blind man, that I love Madeleine as men love at my age, to the point of frenzy? Can't you understand that the thought of her invades my whole being; that desire scorches my brain; that her name, when I pronounce it, burns my lips?"

"And you are neither disturbed nor moved by the thought that you are preparing the most intense suffering for her?"

"I must do it. Would she ever be mine without cruel suffering, without the bitterest disappointment? On the day when you have led Madame Fauvel and her niece so near the abyss that they can see its depths, on that day I shall appear. When they deem themselves irrevocably lost, I will save them. Oh! I have reserved a fine scene for myself, I tell you! and I shall play it with such nobility and grandeur that Madeleine will be touched. She hates me — so much the better! When she sees, when it is proved to her, that it is herself I want and not her money, she will cease to despise me. There is no woman whom a great passion does not touch, and passion excuses everything. I do not say that she will love me, but she will give herself to me without repugnance; that is all I ask."

Raoul was appalled by this cynicism, by this wealth of cold-blooded villany. Clameran demonstrated anew his vast superiority in wickedness, and the apprentice admired the master.

"You would certainly succeed, uncle," he said, "except for the adored cashier. But there will always be between Madeleine and you Prosper's memory, at least, if not himself."

Louis smiled a wicked smile, which was rendered

even more significant and formidable by a gesture of wrath and disdain.

"Prosper!" he exclaimed, throwing away his cigar, which had gone out, "I don't care a fig for him."

"She loves him."

"So much the worse for him. In six months she will have ceased to love him. He is lost already, morally. Whenever it suits my pleasure, I will finish him. Do you know whither evil roads lead, my nephew? Prosper has an expensive mistress, he keeps a carriage, he has rich friends, he gambles. You're a gambler, aren't you? After some night of hard luck he will need money; losses at baccarat must be paid in twenty-four hours, he will want to pay, and — he has a safe —"

On the impulse of the moment Raoul could not refrain from protesting,

"Oh!"

"He is honest, you're going to say, I suppose! *Parbleu!* I hope so. I was honest, too, on the day before I first packed the cards. A knave would have wormed the truth out of Madeleine long ago, and forced us to strike our tents. She loves him, you say? In that case what sort of stuff flows in his veins, that he allows his beloved to be stolen from him in this way? Ah! if I had felt Madeleine's hand quiver in mine, if her breath had touched my brow in a kiss, the whole world could not take her from me. Woe to the man who stands in my path! Prosper is in my way, and I suppress him. I will undertake, with your aid, to force him into such a slough that Madeleine's thoughts won't go there in search of him."

Louis' tone expressed such intense passion, such

an overpowering longing for revenge, that Raoul, really moved, reflected.

"You assign to me," he said, after a long pause, "an abominable part to play."

"Can it be that my nephew has scruples?" retorted Clameran, in the most sneering tone.

"Scruples — not exactly that; but I confess —"

"What? That you would like to retreat? It's a little late to think of that. Oho! so monsieur would have all the enjoyments of luxury, pockets full of gold, race-horses, and everything that glitters and makes others envious — but monsieur wishes to remain virtuous! In that case one must be born with government bonds. Idiot! Did you ever know people like us to draw millions from the limpid springs of virtue? We fish in the mud, my nephew, and we wash the mud off afterwards."

"I have never been rich enough to be honest," said Raoul, humbly; "but it does seem rough to torture two poor defenceless women, and to slaughter a poor devil who thinks that I'm his friend, deuce take it!"

This resistance, which he called absurd, ridiculous, irritated Louis de Clameran to the last degree.

"Upon my word!" he cried, "you make me blush for you! An opportunity presents itself, an incredible, un hoped-for, inconceivable opportunity to make our fortune at one stroke, and you balk at it. No one but a donkey would refuse to drink when he's thirsty, because he sees a little slime in the bottom of his pail. You would prefer petty rascalities at retail, I suppose? Where does your system lead? To the hospital or to the central police station with an escort of gendarmes. Do you know where I was a year ago, after twenty years of prodigious exploits that would

cast all the diplomatic bodies of Europe into the shade? I was at a point where I gazed longingly at my pistols.—So you would prefer, would you, to dawdle along at Madame Fauvel's expense, pilfering one or two thousand franc notes every month after an endearing scene?"

"I am neither ambitious nor cruel."

"What of that? Suppose Madame Fauvel dies to-morrow, what becomes of you? Will you go, with crêpe on your hat, and ask the widower to continue your little allowance?"

Raoul interrupted his uncle with an angry gesture. "Enough of that," he said; "I have never had any idea of retreating. My reason for stating my objections was that I wanted to show you what vile things you expect me to do, and to prove to you that you can do nothing without me."

"I have never claimed that I could."

"In that case, my revered uncle, what will my share be? Oh! no tiresome protestations! What do you offer in case of success? what in case we fail?"

"You shall have, as I have told you, 25,000 francs a year, and whatever you can obtain between now and my marriage shall be your own."

"All right, these conditions are satisfactory to me; where are my guaranties?"

The negotiation, having reached this point, bade fair to be protracted and difficult to settle. The two conspirators knew each other, and had the best of reasons for being suspicious of each other.

"What are you afraid of?" said Clameran.

"Of everything," Raoul replied. "To whom shall I apply for justice if you deceive me. To this pretty little dagger of mine? No, thanks, they'd make me pay as dear for your skin as for an honest man's."

At last, after endless discussions, everything was settled to their mutual satisfaction, and they separated with a profusion of hand clasps.

Alas! Madame Fauvel and her niece were destined soon to feel the effects of the compact between these two villains. Everything happened from point to point as Louis de Clameran had foreseen and arranged. Once again, and just when Madame Fauvel ventured to breathe freely, Raoul's conduct abruptly changed. His dissipation began again more violently than ever.

Formerly Madame Fauvel had occasion to wonder where he spent all the money that she gave him. Now she had no need to ask any questions. Raoul made parade of insane passions; he showed himself everywhere, dressed like the young dandies who are the laughing-stock of the boulevards; he was seen in proscenium boxes at first performances, and at the races in a four-horse drag. Naturally, therefore, his need of money had never been so urgent, so imperative; never had Madame Fauvel had to defend herself against such exorbitant and such oft-repeated demands. Nor did he show the slightest delicacy in his shameless bleeding of the poor woman; he had laid aside all shame. Formerly he clothed his requests in wheedling circumlocutions, saving appearances as much as possible, generally adopting a tone of entreaty. But now he spoke like a master, as if he were claiming something that was his due; he demanded, and at the slightest remonstrance threatened with the brutal manner of a Don Juan of the barriers forcing his victim.

At this rate the apparent resources of Madame Fauvel and her niece were speedily exhausted. In a month the wretch had squandered their savings.

Thereupon they had recourse to all the shameful expedients of women whose secret extravagance is the ruin of a household. They affected humiliating savings in all directions. They bought on credit and made the tradesmen wait. Then, too, they magnified their bills and even invented some. They attributed to each other such expensive whims that M. Fauvel said to them one day with a smile:—

“You are becoming very coquettish, mesdames!”

Poor women! There were whole weeks when they bought nothing, living upon their past splendor, having their old dresses made over, and groaning over their position in society, which made a certain amount of show obligatory upon them.

Madeleine, more clear-sighted than her aunt, saw, not without dismay, the moment approach when they must answer no, and everything must be discovered. Although she considered all their present sacrifices absolutely useless and wasted, she held her peace. A delicacy of feeling which all noble souls will understand, caused her to conceal all her apprehensions beneath an affectation of security. Precisely because she was sacrificing herself, she was careful to refrain from any remark which might resemble a reproach.

“When Raoul is thoroughly persuaded that we can do nothing more for him,” she said to her aunt, “he will stop and come back to you.”

The day came, however, when Madeleine and her aunt were stripped equally bare. On the preceding day Madame Fauvel had had several guests to dinner, and she had hardly been able to give the cook the necessary money for certain purchases which he went into Paris to make.

On that day Raoul made his appearance. Never, so he declared, had he been so terribly embarrassed;

he absolutely must have two thousand francs. In vain did she explain the situation to him, implore him to wait; he would not listen, he was terrible, pitiless.

"But I have nothing to give you, unhappy boy," said Madame Fauvel, in desperation, "nothing in the world; you have taken everything from me. I have nothing left but my jewels, — do you want them? If they will be of any use to you, take them."

Unbounded as the young pirate's impudence was, he could not refrain from blushing. He was moved to pity for this unfortunate woman who had been so kind, so indulgent to him, who had lavished her maternal caresses upon him so many times. He pitied this unhappy girl, the noble-hearted victim of a state of affairs which was not her work. But he had promised, he knew that a powerful hand would arrest the poor women on the brink of the precipice; and he saw fortune, a great fortune, at the end of all these infamies, which he promised himself that he would atone for later. So he braced himself against his emotion and answered his mother in a harsh voice: —

"Give them to me; I will take them to the Mont-de-Piété."

Madame Fauvel gave him a jewel case containing a set of diamonds. It was a present her husband had given her on the day when, having gone over his books, he had found that he was worth more than a million. And so horrible was the destitution of these two women, who were surrounded by princely magnificence, whose orders ten servants were ready to obey, whose horses were pawing the ground in the courtyard, that they implored Raoul to bring back a part of what he borrowed at the Mont-de-Piété, however small a part it might be.

He promised and kept his word. But they had suggested a new resource, and he abused it. One by one all of Madame Fauvel's jewels followed the diamonds, and, when hers were all gone, Madeleine's followed them.

A recent trial, which exhibited to us a woman, still young and beautiful, exploited for five years by a detestable villain who had obtained possession of her correspondence, — a trial which made one's cheeks burn with shame as he read, teaches us how low human infamy can descend.

And such abominations are not so rare as one might suppose. How many people there are who live on a stolen secret which they cause to "sweat gold," — from the cabman who periodically extorts ten louis from the imprudent creature he once drove to an assignation, to the newly gloved knave who, having accidentally become acquainted with a financial scheme, forces those who are interested to purchase his silence!

"Blackmail," said a former prefect of police, "is an industry which supports something like ten thousand people in Paris alone. Sometimes we know the chief operator, sometimes we know the victim, and yet we are condemned to inaction. And more than that, if we happen to catch the cur in the act, the victim, in her terror at the thought of having her secret disclosed, turns against us."

It is true, blackmail is really an industry. It is in many cases the means of livelihood of those hateful scoundrels who never have anything to do, who, without a sou of income, so far as is known, spend a great deal of money, and of whom we say :—

"What do they live on?"

The trouble is that the victims have no idea how

easy it is to rid themselves of their tyrants. The police know well enough what secrets must be kept. A visit to Rue de Jerusalem, a confidential communication to a chief of division as close-mouthed as a confessional, and the trick is done, without publicity or scandal, and nothing ever transpires. There are traps for master blackmailers.¹

Madame Fauvel had nothing but her prayers and her tears to defend her against the villains who were pitilessly pursuing her. But these revolting extortions sometimes brought on such paroxysms of emotion that Raoul, shocked and deeply moved, was himself seized with horror and disgust.

"My heart fails me," he said to his uncle; "I am at the end of my rope. For robbery with violence I'm your man; but to murder two miserable creatures whom I like is too much for me!"

Clameran seemed in no wise surprised at his repugnance.

"It is too bad, I know," he said, "but necessity knows no law. Come, a little energy and patience; we are nearing the goal."

They were nearer than Clameran supposed. Toward the end of November, Madame Fauvel had so strong a feeling that they were on the eve of a catastrophe that it occurred to her to apply to the marquis. She had not seen him since he had come, soon after his return from Oloron, to tell her of his inheritance. Being persuaded at that time that he was Raoul's evil genius, she had received him so coolly that he was justified in not calling upon her again.

She hesitated before mentioning this project to her niece, anticipating a lively opposition. To her great surprise, Madeleine approved. Misfortune, that mar-

¹ See the *Slaves of Paris*.

vellous teacher, had aroused and developed Madeleine's divinatory faculty. Reflecting on what had gone before, comparing and studying all the circumstances, she was not far from suspecting that Raoul was simply his uncle's tool. Reasoning very sensibly, she said to herself that it was not possible that Raoul, who was not lacking in common-sense, should misbehave as he did, at the risk of losing everything, without some secret motives. She concluded that the persecution was much more fictitious than real. Her conviction in this regard was so strong that if her own interest alone had been involved, she would have made a vigorous resistance, assured that the threats of exposure would not be carried out. Remembering, not without a shudder, certain glances that Clameran had bestowed upon her, she almost arrived at the truth. She had a feeling that all these threats had but one object,—to force her aunt to throw her into the marquis's arms. Having her mind made up to the sacrifice, despite the repugnance of her mind and the revolt of her whole being, she almost wished that the sacrifice might be accomplished; anything seemed to her preferable to the intolerable existence which Raoul forced upon them.

"The sooner you see M. de Clameran," she said to her aunt, "the better it will be."

Consequently, Madame Fauvel called upon the marquis at the Hôtel du Louvre two days later, having signified her intention by a note. He received her with cold and studied courtesy, like a man who has been misunderstood and, being grieved and wounded, maintains an attitude of reserve.

He seemed indignant at his nephew's conduct, and at one moment uttered an oath, saying that he would bring the scoundrel to his senses. But when Madame

Fauvel informed him that Raoul applied incessantly to her because he did not choose to ask him for money, Clameran seemed confounded.

"Ah!" he cried, "that is altogether too audacious! The villain! I have given him more than twenty thousand francs within four months, and I only consented to give them to him because he constantly threatened to have recourse to you."

Detecting upon Madame Fauvel's face an expression of surprise which resembled doubt, Louis rose, opened his secretary, took from it Raoul's receipts, and showed them to her. The total was 23,500 francs.

Madame Fauvel was overwhelmed.

"He has had nearly forty thousand francs from me," she said, "so that there are at least sixty thousand which he has spent in four months!"

"It would be incredible," said Clameran, "unless he is in love, as he says."

"Great God! what do those creatures do with all the money that is spent on them?"

"That is something that no one has ever been able to find out."

He seemed to be sincerely sorry for Madame Fauvel; he promised her that he would see Raoul that very evening, and that he would find a way to bring him around to better sentiments. And then, after a long exordium, he placed his whole fortune at her disposal.

Madame Fauvel refused his offer, but she was touched by it; and she said to her niece when she returned home:—

"We may have been mistaken; perhaps he's not a bad man."

Madeleine shook her head sadly. She had antici-

pated what had happened; the marquis's noble disinterestedness was a confirmation of her presentiments.

Raoul meanwhile went to his uncle's in search of news. He found him radiant.

"Everything is going on as well as we could wish, my dear nephew," he said; "your receipts produced a marvellous effect. Ah! you are a precious partner, and I owe you my warmest congratulations. Forty thousand francs in four months, eh?"

"Yes," replied Raoul, nonchalantly, "that is about what the Mont-de-Piété loaned me."

"Damnation! you must have a tidy little sum laid by, for the young lady at the Délassements is only a pretext, I suppose?"

"That is my business, my dear uncle. Remember our agreement. What I can tell you is that Madame Fauvel and Madeleine have turned everything into money; they have nothing left, and I have had enough of my rôle."

"And your rôle is at an end. I forbid you to ask for another centime."

"Where do we stand now? What is happening?"

"The mine is loaded, nephew, and I am simply waiting for an opportunity to put the match to it."

This opportunity, which Louis de Clameran awaited with feverish impatience, he proposed that his rival, Prosper Bertomy, should supply. He loved Madeleine too well not to be jealous of frenzy of the man whom she had chosen of her free will, not to hate him with all the force of his passion.

It was within his power, he knew, to marry Madeleine. But how? By having recourse to shameful violence, holding the knife at her throat. He felt as if he should go mad at the thought that he might possess her, her body be his, but that her thoughts,

escaping from his control, would fly away to Prosper. So it was that he had sworn that, before marrying her, he would force the cashier into some quagmire of degradation, whence it would be impossible for him to escape. He had thought of killing him, he preferred to dishonor him.

At first he had imagined that it would be a simple matter to ruin the unfortunate young man; he supposed that he would himself furnish the means. He was mistaken. Prosper was leading, it is true, one of those reckless lives which generally end in disaster, but he introduced a sort of system into his dissipation. Although he might be in a bad, yes, a dangerous situation, although he might be devoured by exactions, harassed by creditors, reduced to expedients, his precautions were so well taken that it was impossible to detect it. All the attempts that had been made to accelerate his ruin had failed, and in vain did Raoul, with his hands full of gold, play the rôle of the tempter and try to pave the way for his fall.

He played high, but he played without excitement, almost without inclination, and neither the pleasure of winning nor the vexation of losing had ever caused him to lose his self-possession. His mistress, Nina Gypsy, was extravagant and heedless, but she was devoted to him, and her whims did not go beyond certain limits. Upon close examination his conduct seemed to be that of a man in dire distress struggling to divert his thoughts, but of one who has not given up all hope and whose especial desire is to gain time.

As an intimate friend of Prosper, and his confidant, Raoul had reckoned up the situation with a sagacious eye, and fathomed the cashier's inmost feelings.

"Don't count upon any insane performance on that fellow's part," he said to his uncle; "his disappoint-

ment in love has left his brain cooler than a money-lender's. What he sees in the future no one knows. Perhaps, when he reaches the end of his rope, he will blow his brains out, but one thing is sure, and that is that he will never make up his mind to a base or even an indelicate act; he will never touch the safe that is intrusted to his honor."

"We must urge him more vigorously," rejoined Clameran, "surround him, loan him money, flatter his vanity, plant caprices in Madame Gypsy's brain."

Raoul shook his head, like a man convinced of the fruitlessness of his efforts.

"You don't know Prosper, uncle. You can't galvanize a dead man. Madeleine killed him the day she banished him. Everything is indifferent to him; he takes no interest in anything."

"We will wait."

They did wait, and, to Madame Fauvel's great surprise, Raoul became once more what he had been during M. de Clameran's absence. A streak of parsimony succeeded the streak of extravagance; he had entirely broken with the *Délassements*. Indeed, on the pretext of economy he refused to leave his house at Vésinet, disagreeable as it was in winter. He preferred, he said, to expiate his misconduct in that solitude. The truth was that by continuing to live there he assured his liberty and placed himself out of reach of his mother's visits.

It was about this time that Madame Fauvel, overjoyed by this change, conceived the idea of having Raoul enter her husband's office. M. Fauvel approved of the idea. He had heard of Raoul's dissipated habits, and, on several occasions had loaned him considerable sums. Being persuaded that a young man without employment can do nothing but

make a fool of himself, he offered him a desk in the correspondence bureau, with a salary of 500 francs per month.

This proposal delighted Raoul, but, by Clameran's imperative command, he declined it, saying that he felt no vocation for banking operations. This refusal offended the banker so deeply that he reproached Raoul with considerable severity, telling him that he could not rely upon him thenceforth; and Raoul seized that pretext for ostensibly breaking off his visits. He still saw his mother, but always in the afternoon or evening, when he was sure that M. Fauvel had gone out; and he came just often enough to keep posted as to the progress of affairs in the house.

This sudden repose after such incessant and cruel agitation seemed ominous to Madeleine. She was more certain than ever that all these changes were attributable to a maturely devised plan. She realized that this calm, threatening as that which goes before the storm, was the precursor of a last terrible assault. She said nothing to her aunt of her presentiments, but she was prepared for everything.

"What are they doing?" Madame Fauvel sometimes said; "can they have given up persecuting us, at last?"

"True," Madeleine would reply, "what are they doing?"

The reason that neither Louis nor Raoul gave any sign of life was that they were standing motionless, like the huntsman in ambush, who is fearful of arousing the suspicions of his victims. They were watching for their chance. Hanging upon Prosper's steps, Raoul had exhausted all the resources of his imagination in the attempt to compromise him, to lead him into some snare where he would leave his honor

behind. But as he had anticipated, the cashier's indifference presented few points of attack.

Clameran was beginning to be impatient and was looking about in quest of some more expeditious method, when he was aroused by Raoul one morning about three o'clock. He realized that something of exceptional importance must have happened to bring his nephew to his rooms at such an hour.

"What's the matter?" he asked, thoroughly disturbed.

"Perhaps nothing, perhaps everything. I have just this instant left Prosper."

"Well?"

"I invited him to dinner with Madame Gypsy and three of my friends. After dinner I organized a little game of baccarat, a lively game enough, but it was impossible to get Prosper started, although he was tipsy."

Louis in his disappointment made a gesture of annoyance.

"You must be tipsy yourself," he said, "to come and wake me up in the middle of the night to tell me such twaddle."

"Wait; there's something more."

"*Morbleu*! tell me what it is, then!"

"After we had played cards we went to supper, and Prosper, who was getting drunker and drunker, let drop the word with which he locked the safe."

Clameran could not restrain a shout of triumph.

"What is the word?" he asked.

"His mistress's name."

"Gypsy! — yes, there are five letters."

He was so excited, so agitated, that he leaped out of bed, put on a *robe de chambre* and began to pace the room.

"We have him!" he said, with a delirious expression of satisfied hatred; "he is in our hands! Ah! the virtuous cashier would not touch his safe, but we will touch it for him, and he will be dishonored all the same. We have the word, you know where the key is, for you have told me so."

"When M. Fauvel goes out he almost always leaves his key in one of the drawers of the secretary in his bedroom."

"Very good! you will go to Madame Fauvel and ask her for the key; she will give it to you or you will take it from her by force, it matters little which; when you have it you will open the safe and take out all it contains. Ah! Master Prosper, it will cost you dear to be loved by the woman I love!"

For more than five minutes Clameran declaimed, completely beside himself, blending his love for Madeleine and his hatred for Prosper in such a strange medley that Raoul asked himself in all seriousness if he were not going mad. He thought that it was his duty to calm him.

"Before singing a *Te Deum*," he said, "let us examine the difficulties."

"I see none."

"Prosper may change his word to-morrow."

"True, but it's improbable; he won't remember what he said; besides, we will make haste."

"That is not all. As a result of most positive orders from M. Fauvel, only a trifling sum is ever left in the safe over night."

"There will be a very large sum there over night when I choose."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I have three hundred thousand francs in M. Fauvel's hands, and that if I ask to have them

paid to me some day, very early, when the office opens, they will pass the night in the safe."

"What an idea!" cried Raoul, in utter stupefaction.

It was an idea, in very truth, and the two confederates passed several hours discussing it, dissecting it, studying its strong and weak points. Raoul dreaded a resistance on Madame Fauvel's part that it would be impossible to overcome. If she were beaten, would she not go to her husband and confess everything, rather than allow an innocent man to be morally murdered? But Louis did not fear that.

"One sacrifice demands another," he said; "she has done too much not to resign herself to everything. She has abandoned Madeleine, her adopted daughter, to us, and she will abandon a fellow who is nothing more than a stranger to her, after all."

"Very good; but Prosper will not be dishonored in Madeleine's eyes; therefore —"

"You're a mere child, my nephew!"

The plan was complete in every detail and easy of execution.

"If Prosper really told the right word," muttered Raoul, "he is lost!"

It only remained for the two conspirators to agree upon their final arrangements and to fix the day for their abominable crime. After mature reflection, after carefully estimating all the chances, favorable and unfavorable, they agreed that it should be committed during the evening of Monday, February 7th. Their reason for selecting that evening was that Raoul knew that M. Fauvel was to dine with one of his banking friends, and that Madeleine was invited to a young ladies' party. Unless something unforeseen should happen, Raoul would find his mother

alone if he called at the Fauvel mansion about half-past eight.

"I will go to-day," concluded Clameran, "and ask M. Fauvel to have my money ready for Tuesday."

"It is a very short notice, uncle," objected Raoul; "you made an agreement with him by which you were to notify him seasonably in case you wished to withdraw your deposit."

"True, but our banker is proud; I will say that I am in hurry, and he will have the money for me, even if it embarrasses him to do it. Then it will be for you to ask Prosper, as a personal favor, to have the money ready when the office opens."

Once more Raoul studied the situation, seeking the grain of sand which becomes a mountain at the last moment.

"I am to entertain Prosper and Gypsy at Vésinet to-night," he said at last; "but I cannot ask him for anything until I know the banker's reply. As soon as you have it, send Manuel to me with a line."

"I won't send Manuel," said Louis, "because he has left me; but I will send you a messenger."

It was as Louis said. He had insisted upon keeping Manuel in his service because, like the prudent man he was, he was determined not to leave at Oloron a former servant of his brother, who knew his life, who might tell tales and perhaps let slip some compromising remark. So he had taken him away from the province. Then, being somewhat embarrassed by the presence of that faithful servant, who had shared the fortunes and perils of the most honorable of masters, he had gently suggested to him the idea of going to his own country to end his days in peace there. The result was that Manuel had started on the preceding day for Arenys-de-Mar, a small seaport in

Catalonia, where he was born; and Louis de Clameran was looking for a servant.

After breakfasting together Louis and Raoul separated, with an "Until to-morrow." Clameran was so overjoyed that he forgot the abyss of slime that lay between him and success. Raoul, though less excited, was none the less resolved. The abominable deed which he was about to commit would enrich him and deliver him from a domination that he detested. He thought only of his liberty, just as Louis thought only of Madeleine.

Everything happened as the two miscreants wished. The banker, not deigning to appeal to the agreement, consented to pay over the money at the time mentioned above. Prosper promised that it should be ready in the morning. The certainty of triumph made Louis like a wild man. He counted the hours and the minutes.

"When this is all over," he said to Raoul, "I propose to become the most upright of men. I will make such a parade of refinement and delicacy of feeling that he will be a very bold man, *monbleu!* who will dare suspect me of having ever been lacking in them.

In contrast to his uncle, Raoul became more and more depressed. Reflection showed him the execrable deed in all its hideousness. Raoul was a bold, determined, formidable criminal when it was a question of satisfying his greed; he could cheat at cards with a smile on his lips, or plunge a knife into his enemy and sleep quietly afterward, but he was young. He was young; that is to say, vice had not yet eaten its way to the marrow of his bones, corruption had not yet filled his heart so full as to choke and kill the last roots of generous feelings therein. The time when he was

animated by healthy beliefs and by a noble pride was not so far away that he did not still retain something of those beliefs and that pride. Inspired still by the manly spirit of twenty years, he could not help despising cowards; and this underground plot, this slow agony of two poor defenceless women filled him with horror. His heart rose in revolt as he prepared to play the rôle assigned him, the rôle of a traitor who stabs his mother to the heart between two kisses.

Disgusted by Louis' cold and calculating villany, he would have been glad of the excuse of some danger defied to raise him in his own eyes and spur him on to the task. But no, he ran no risks, he knew it perfectly well, not even the risk of the galleys. It was certain that M. Fauvel, even if he should learn the whole disgraceful story, would accomplish the impossible to conceal it. And then, it was a curious fact, at which he was himself surprised, and which he was careful not to confess to Clameran, that he had not been insensible to Madame Fauvel's caresses, and that he felt drawn to her by a sincere affection. He had been happy at Vésinet when his accomplice, his master rather, was at Oloron. He would have liked to become honest, without trouble or effort, being unable to understand why one should commit crime when one has the wherewithal to live in luxury. He bore a mortal enmity to Clameran, who, for the gratification of a selfish passion, abused his power, and would certainly have betrayed him had he been able to do it without inevitably ruining himself.

The result was that his resolution, originally so firm, grew weaker from hour to hour, as the decisive instant approached. And meanwhile Louis did not leave him; Louis held up before his eyes the splendours of a future of luxury, of pleasure, of satisfied

vanity. Clameran beset him, bewildered him, encouraged him, or, to speak in his style, "warmed him up."

He had planned the whole scene with Madame Fauvel, and he made his confederate rehearse it, as coolly as if it were a scene in an ordinary drama; striving, he said, to imbue him thoroughly with the spirit of the part he was to play, a part which, in his view, was well-adapted to soften the revolting and too odiously brutal features of the situation.

But let Louis shout as loudly as he would, and ring the changes on that dazzling figure, 500,000 francs!!! Raoul's conscience shouted more loudly still. So that, on Monday evening, at six o'clock, Raoul was absolutely without strength and without courage, and was beginning to wonder whether, even if he wished to obey, he would be able to do it.

"Are you afraid?" queried Clameran, who had followed with keen anxiety all his inward struggles.

"Yes," replied Raoul, "yes, I have n't your savage will, and I am afraid."

"What! you, my pupil, my friend? It is n't possible. Come, come, have a little energy, *morbleu!* one last stroke of the oar and we are in port. This feeling of yours is purely nervous; let us go and dine, — a glass of burgundy will set you up.

They had just turned into the boulevard. They entered a famous restaurant, to which they often resorted, and installed themselves in a private dining-room. But to no purpose did Louis draw upon his store of gayety; he could not smooth the wrinkles from his companion's brow. Raoul remained gloomy and pale, while the other made merry over his squeamishness, when, after all, it was simply a matter of swallowing a "bitter pill."

Overpowered by the consciousness that he was in

a position where he must obey, Raoul tried to get tipsy, and he drank two bottles of wine, glass after glass. But drunkenness, although invited, disappointed his expectation; the wine betrayed him; he found nought but wrath and disgust at the bottom of his glass.

The clock in the private dining-room struck eight.

"It is time to go," said Louis.

Raoul became livid, his teeth chattered. He tried to rise, but could not; his legs, as limp as rags, refused to carry him.

"Ah! I cannot!" he exclaimed, in a frantic, grief-stricken tone.

A gleam shot from Clameran's eyes. So all his schemes were to end in wretched failure! But he mastered his anger, realizing that the slightest outbreak on his part would ruin everything. He gave the bell-cord a violent jerk. A waiter appeared.

"A bottle of port," he said, "and a bottle of rum."

The waiter having brought what he ordered, Louis filled a large glass with the two liquors mixed, and handed it to Raoul.

"Drink that!" he said.

Raoul emptied the glass at one draught. A slight flush rose to his pale cheeks. He sprang to his feet and cried, dealing the table a blow with his clenched fist: —

"Let us go!"

But he had not taken fifty steps on the boulevard when the factitious energy of the alcohol abandoned him. He clung to Clameran's arm, staggering like a drunken man, more nerveless than the condemned man going to his doom.

"If he only gets into the house!" thought Louis, who knew Raoul thoroughly, having studied him as

self-interest enables one to do ; "once inside, his role will support him and carry him along, and all will go well."

"Remember what we agreed," he said, as they walked along. "Be careful of your *entrées* ; everything depends on that. Have you your pistol in your pocket?"

"Yes, yes ; let me alone."

It was a happy thought of Clameran's to accompany Raoul to M. Fauvel's door, for when they arrived there his strength failed him anew.

"A poor woman," he cried, "an unfortunate boy whose hand I shook yesterday, ruined, murdered ! Oh ! it's a cowardly thing, it's too cowardly !"

"Nonsense !" said Clameran, scornfully ; "I was mistaken in you ; when a man's stomach has gone, he ought to remain honest !"

But Raoul had triumphed at last over all his rebellious instincts. He hurried to the door and rang.

"Is my aunt at home ?" he asked the footman who opened the door.

"Madame is alone in the small salon adjoining her bedroom," was the reply.

Raoul went upstairs.

XX

CLAMERAN had said to Raoul : —

"Above all things, be careful about your *entrée* ; the mere sight of you should tell the whole story and avoid the necessity of impossible explanations."

The injunction was unnecessary. Raoul was so pale and distressed when he entered the small salon, his eyes had such a wild expression, that Madame Fauvel could not restrain a cry when she saw him.

"Raoul! — What has happened to you?"

The sound of that voice, overflowing with affection, produced the effect of an electric shock on the young brigand. A convulsive shudder shook him from head to foot. But at the same time the light shone in on his mind. Louis had made no mistake; Raoul was on the stage, his self-assurance returned, his natural villany resumed the upper hand, and he attacked his rôle.

"The latest misfortune that has happened to me, mother," he replied, "will be the last!"

Madame Fauvel had never seen him thus; she rose, deeply moved, her heart beating fast, and sat down beside him, her face almost touching his, as if by gazing at him with all the force of her will, she could read to the very bottom of his soul.

"What is it?" she repeated. "Raoul, my son, answer me."

He repulsed her, very gently.

"The matter is," he replied, in a stifled voice, which none the less made Madame Fauvel's very entrails quiver, "the matter is, mother, that I am unworthy of you, unworthy of my noble and generous father."

She moved her head as if she would protest.

"Oh! I know myself and I have judged myself," he continued. "No one could possibly reproach me for my infamous conduct so bitterly as my own conscience does. And yet I am not naturally wicked, I am simply a miserable fool. There are times when I am seized with vertigo, and have no idea what I am doing. Ah! I should not be like this, mother, if I had had you with me in my childhood. But being brought up among strangers, left to my own devices, with no other advisers than my instincts, I yielded without a struggle to all my passions. Having noth-

ing, bearing a stolen name, I am vain and consumed by ambition. Poor as I am, with no other means than your generosity, I have the tastes and vices of a millionaire's son. Alas! when I found you, the evil was already done. Your affection, your maternal solicitude, which have given me my only days of real happiness on earth, could not stop me. I had suffered so much, I had endured so many privations, sometimes being without bread, that I was driven wild by the luxury, so new and strange to me, which I owed to you. I pounced upon dissipation, as the sot who has been long deprived of wine pounces upon strong liquors."

Raoul spoke with an accent of such profound conviction, with such vehemence, that Madame Fauvel did not think of interrupting him. She listened in terrified silence, not daring to question him, certain that she was about to learn something horrible. He meanwhile continued: —

"Yes, I have been an insane fool. Happiness passed near to me, and I did not know enough to put out my hand to detain it. I repulsed the delicious reality and darted in pursuit of a phantom. I, who should have passed my life at your knees, devising new methods of testifying to my gratitude, made it my business to deal you the most cruel blows, to drive you to despair, to make you the most miserable of mortals. Ah! I was a vile wretch when I threw to the winds, for a creature whom I despised, a fortune of which every gold piece cost you a tear. I realized too late that happiness was to be found only by your side."

He broke off, as if he were overwhelmed by the consciousness of his wrong-doing; he seemed on the point of bursting into tears.

"It is never too late to repent, to redeem one's errors, my son," whispered Madame Fauvel.

"Ah! if I only could!" cried Raoul. "But no! it is too late. Nor do I know how long my good resolutions would last! To-day is not the first time that I have judged myself without pity. Seized with remorse after every new transgression, I have sworn to win my own esteem anew. Alas! what has been the result of my periodical repentances? On the first occasion I would forget my shame and my oaths. You think me a man, but I am only a poor, weak child. I am vacillating and cowardly, and you are not strong enough to dominate my weakness, to direct my vacillating will. I have the best intentions in the world, and my acts are the acts of a villain. The disproportion between my position and my desires is so great that I cannot resign myself to it. Indeed, who knows to what lengths my pitiable character would lead me!"

With an appallingly reckless gesture he added: —

"But I will find a way to do myself justice!"

Madame Fauvel was too cruelly agitated to follow Raoul's clever transitions.

"Speak!" she cried; "tell me what you mean! Am I not your mother? You owe me the truth; I can endure anything."

He seemed to hesitate, as if he were terrified by the terrible blow he was about to deal his mother. At last he replied in a hollow voice: —

"I am ruined!"

"Ruined!"

"Yes, and I have nothing more to expect or to hope for. I am dishonored, by my own fault, my very great fault."

"Raoul!"

"It is true. But have no fear, mother; I will not trail in the dust the name you gave me. I shall have, at least, the vulgar courage not to survive my dishonor. Nay, mother, do not pity me. I am one of those whom destiny pursues relentlessly, and who have no refuge but death. I am a fatal creature. Were not you compelled to curse my birth? The thought of me haunted your sleepless nights for many years. Later, I found you, and, to reward you for your devotion, I have brought an element of misery into your life."

"Ungrateful boy! have I ever reproached you?"

"Never. And so your Raoul will die blessing you, and with your dear name on his lips."

"Die!"

"I must, mother, — honor commands; I am condemned by two judges from whom there is no appeal: my will and my conscience."

An hour earlier Madame Fauvel would have sworn that Raoul had made her suffer all that a woman can endure; but now he was inflicting upon her a new pang, so excruciating that the others seemed nothing at all in comparison.

"What have you done?" she faltered.

"Some money was placed in my hands; I gambled and lost it."

"Is it an enormous sum?"

"No, but neither you nor I can obtain it. Poor mother! have n't I taken everything from you? Have you not given me everything, to your last jewel?"

"But M. de Clameran is rich, he has placed his fortune at my disposal; I will order the carriage and go to him."

"M. de Clameran is absent for a week, mother, and I am to be saved or lost to-night. I thought of every-

thing, I tell you, before making up my mind. A man clings to life, at twenty."

He pulled the pistol half way out of his pocket and added with a forced smile: —

"Here is what will put everything to rights."

Madame Fauvel was too intensely excited to reflect upon the ghastly villany of Raoul's conduct or to recognize in his horrible threats a desperate expedient. Forgetting the past, heedless of the future, entirely absorbed by the present emergency, she saw but one thing, that her son was about to die by his own hand, and that she was powerless to prevent his suicide.

"I insist upon your waiting," she said. "André will soon be at home; I will tell him that I need — How much money was placed in your hands?"

"Thirty thousand francs."

"You shall have it to-morrow."

"I must have it to-night."

She wrung her hands in despair; she felt that she was going mad.

"To-night!" she said; "why did n't you come earlier? Did you lack confidence in me? To-night there is no one in the counting-room — if there were —"

Raoul had been waiting for that word; he seized it as it passed and exclaimed joyfully, as if a bright gleam had lighted up the darkness of genuine despair: —

"The counting-room! but you know where the key to the safe is, don't you?"

"Yes, it is in there."

"Very well!"

He looked at Madame Fauvel with such infernal audacity in his expression that she lowered her eyes.

"Give it to me, mother," he said, in a tone of entreaty.

"Unhappy boy!"

"Life is what I ask you to give me."

That prayer decided her; she took one of the candles, hurried into her bedroom, opened the secretary, and found M. Fauvel's key there. But as she was about to hand it to Raoul, her reason returned.

"No," she stammered; "no, it is impossible."

He did not insist, and seemed to be preparing to go.

"Very well," he said; "one last kiss, then, mother."

She interrupted him: —

"What can you do with the key, Raoul? do you know the word?"

"No, but I can try."

"Don't you know that there is never any money in the safe?"

"Let us try all the same. If I succeed in opening it, by a miracle, and if there is money in it, it will mean that God has taken pity on us."

"And suppose you don't succeed? Will you swear to me that you will wait until to-morrow?"

"I swear it by my father's memory!"

"Then here is the key; come."

Raoul and Madame Fauvel, pale and trembling, passed through the banker's private office to the narrow spiral staircase communicating with the offices. Raoul walked first, carrying the light and holding the key to the safe in his tightly clenched fingers.

At that moment Madame Fauvel firmly believed that Raoul's attempt would be fruitless. During the few moments that it had taken them to go down, she had had time to reflect. Being familiar with the

method of locking the safe, she knew that the key was the least important of all the safeguards, and that it would be of no use to one who did not know the word. Now, it seemed impossible to her that Raoul should know that word, which she herself did not know. Where and how could he have learned it?

Assuming, however, that he could open it, that chance, which plays even more surprising tricks than that, should place the combination in his hands, she was certain, being acquainted with the customs of the establishment, that there would not, could not be much money in the safe, because the greater part of it was always deposited at the Bank. She was almost at ease, therefore, concerning the results of this revolting enterprise, and she dreaded nothing but Raoul's desperation after a failure. She lent her hand to an action the mere thought of which was inexpressibly shocking to her, as she had given up the key, because she trusted in Raoul's word, and because she wished above all else to gain time.

"When he realizes the folly of his hopes and his efforts," she thought, "he will wait until to-morrow, he has given me his word; and then, to-morrow, I — to-morrow —"

What she would do on the morrow she had no idea, nor did she even ask herself the question. But in desperate situations, the slightest delay restores hope, as if a brief respite were final salvation. At the last moment the condemned man implores a reprieve for a day, an hour, a few minutes. Raoul was about to take his own life, and she prayed to God to grant her a night, just one night, as if she could rely upon the happening, in that short space of time, of unforeseen events which would suddenly afford a means of escape from an impossible situation.

They had arrived in Prosper's office, and Raoul placed the lamp on a shelf so high that it lighted the whole room notwithstanding the shade. He thereupon recovered, if not all his self-possession, at least that mechanical precision of movement which is almost independent of the volition, and which men accustomed to danger always have at command when the danger is most pressing.

Swiftly, and with the dexterity born of experience, he placed the five buttons of the lock on the letters composing the name, *Gypsy*. During this brief operation his features expressed the most painful anxiety. He asked himself if the terrible energy he had put forth would not be thrown away, if he should succeed in opening the safe, if he should find the large sum there that he expected. Prosper might have changed the word. Had he sent to the bank during the day?

With sorrowful commiseration, Madame Fauvel remarked Raoul's visible apprehension. She could read in his eyes the insane hope of the unfortunate, who, desiring a thing passionately, end by persuading themselves that the mere exertion of their will is enough to overthrow all obstacles. Being an intimate friend of Prosper, Raoul had come to meet him fifty times when the office closed, and he knew perfectly, from having examined it and even tried it—he was a far-seeing youth—how the key must be handled in the lock. He inserted it gently and turned it; pushed it farther in and turned it a second time; then pushed it home and turned it again. His heart throbbed so violently that Madame Fauvel might have heard it.

The word had not been changed; the safe opened. Raoul and his mother uttered a cry at the same moment, she of dismay, he of triumph.

"Shut the door!" cried Madame Fauvel, horrified at this inexplicable, incomprehensible result; leave the office; come!"

Half mad, she rushed at Raoul, clung desperately to his arm, and pulled it toward her with such force that the key came out of the lock, slipped along the door of the safe, and made a long, deep scratch.

But Raoul had had time to notice on the upper shelf of the safe three packages of bank-notes. He seized them with his left hand and slipped them between his shirt and his waistcoat.

Exhausted by the effort she had made, succumbing to the violence of her emotions, Madame Fauvel had released Raoul's arm, and, to keep from falling, leaned against the back of Prosper's chair.

"Mercy! Raoul," she said; "I implore you, put those bank-notes back in the safe; to-morrow I will obtain ten times as much, I swear it, and I will give it to you! Oh! my son, have pity on your mother, I beseech you!"

He was not listening to her; he was examining the scratch left on the door; that trace of the theft was very perceptible and disturbed him.

"At least," continued Madame Fauvel, "do not take it all; keep just what you need to save you, and leave the rest."

"What's the use? Will not the loss be discovered all the same?"

"No, because I will arrange everything, you see. Let me arrange it, I shall be able to find some plausible explanation, I will tell André that I needed money."

Raoul had closed the safe, with infinite precautions.

"Come," he said to his mother, "let us go now;

somebody may surprise us; a servant may go to the salon and be surprised not to find us there."

This cruel indifference, this ability to reason coldly at such a moment, filled Madame Fauvel with indignation. She believed that she still had some influence over her son; she believed in the power of her prayers and her tears.

"Very good!" she replied; "so much the better! Let them surprise us, I shall be well content. Then it will all be over; André will turn me out-of-doors as a miserable wretch, but I will not sacrifice the innocent. Prosper will be accused to-morrow. Clameran has robbed him of the woman he loves, now you undertake to steal his honor, and I will not have it."

She talked very loud, in such excited tones that Raoul was afraid. He knew that one of the messengers passed the night in the adjoining room; and, although it was not late, he might very well have gone to bed and so overhear everything.

"Come upstairs!" he said, grasping Madame Fauvel's arm.

But she struggled; she clung to a table to resist more effectually.

"I have been cowardly enough to sacrifice Madeleine," she said; "I will not sacrifice Prosper."

Raoul realized that he must resort to a crushing argument to break her determination.

He gave a cynical laugh.

"Ha! ha! so you don't understand that Prosper and I are in accord, and that he is waiting for me, to divide the booty?"

"Impossible!"

"Upon my word! do you suppose that it was chance alone that whispered the word in my ear and filled the safe?"

"Prosper is honest."

"Certainly, and so am I. But we needed money."

"You lie."

"No, dear mother; Madeleine dismissed Prosper, and the poor fellow consoles himself as best he can; and consolation is infernally expensive."

He had taken the lamp and was pushing Madame Fauvel toward the stairs, gently but with extraordinary strength. She made no further resistance, being more confounded by what she had just heard than by seeing the safe open.

"What!" she murmured, "Prosper a thief!"

She wondered if she were not the victim of some horrible nightmare, if the awakening would not come soon and deliver her from this intolerable mental torture. Her mind no longer belonged to her, and she climbed the steep stairs mechanically, supported by Raoul.

"You must put the key back in the secretary," said Raoul, as soon as they were in the bedroom.

But she did not seem to hear him, and he himself replaced the key of the safe in the drawer from which he had seen her take it. Then he escorted, or rather carried, Madame Fauvel to the small salon where she was when he arrived, and seated her in a chair.

The unhappy woman was so prostrated, her fixed, expressionless eyes betrayed so plainly the terrible confusion of her mind, that Raoul, really alarmed, wondered if she were not going mad.

"Come, come, my dear mother," he said, trying to warm her icy hands, "be yourself again. You have just saved my life, and we have done Prosper an immense service at the same time. Don't be afraid; everything will come out all right. Prosper will be accused, arrested perhaps; he expects it, but he will

deny his guilt, and as they won't be able to prove it, he will be released."

But he wasted his time and his falsehoods; Madame Fauvel was beyond listening to him.

"Raoul," she murmured, "my son, you have killed me."

Her voice had such a penetrating sweetness, her accent was so indicative of the most utter despair, that Raoul, moved to the depths of his soul, was conscious of a good impulse; he longed to restore what he had just stolen. The thought of Clameran arrested him. Thereupon, seeing that Madame Fauvel remained in her arm-chair, prostrated, almost lifeless, and trembling lest M. Fauvel or Madeleine should come in and demand an explanation, he deposited a kiss on his mother's forehead and fled.

Clameran, tormented by uncertainty, was awaiting his confederate in the private room at the restaurant, where they had dined. He was wondering whether Raoul's courage had not failed him at the last moment, he not being there to encourage him. Moreover, he knew that a mere caprice of chance is enough to disarrange the best-laid plans. When Raoul appeared, therefore, he started abruptly to his feet, pale with the agony of suspense, and in an almost inaudible voice inquired:—

"Well?"

"It is all over, uncle, thanks to you; I am now the vilest of scoundrels."

"He hastily unbuttoned his waistcoat, and tossing the four packages of bank-notes on the table, which was still stained with the wine that had been ordered to excite his brain, he added in a tone in which his hatred and his contempt were manifest:

"I hope you are satisfied; here is the money, which

will cost three persons their honor and perhaps their lives!"

Clameran did not notice the insult. He had seized the bank-notes with a feverish hand, and was turning them over and over as if to convince himself of the reality of the triumph.

"Now," he said, "Madeleine is mine."

Raoul held his peace; the sight of that joy, after the scene he had just witnessed, disgusted and humiliated him. But Louis mistook the causes of his evident depression.

"Was it very hard?" he asked with a smile.

"I forbid you," cried Raoul, beside himself with excitement, "I forbid you, do you hear, ever to mention this evening to me again. I wish to forget it."

At this explosion of wrath Clameran imperceptibly shrugged his shoulders.

"As you please," he said with a sneer; "forget, my handsome nephew, forget. I like to believe, however, that you will not refuse to take this 350,000 francs, by way of souvenir. Take it, it is yours."

This generosity seemed neither to surprise nor to content Raoul.

"According to our agreement," he said, "I am entitled to much more."

"Exactly, so this is simply a payment on account."

"And when shall I have the rest, if you please?"

"On the day of my marriage to Madeleine, nephew mine; not before. You are too valuable an auxiliary for me to think of depriving myself of your services; and, you know, even if I don't distrust you, I am not absolutely sure of your sincere affection."

Raoul reflected that to commit a crime and then not profit by it would be altogether too idiotic. He had come with the purpose of breaking with Clame-

ran, but he decided not to abandon his confederate's fortunes until he should no longer have anything to hope for from him.

"Very good," he said, "I accept the payment on account, but no more commissions like that of this evening; I shall refuse them."

Clameran laughed heartily.

"Good," he rejoined; "very good. You are turning honest; this is the best time, as you're a rich man now. Your timorous conscience need have no fear; I shall have nothing more for you to do except some insignificant matters of detail. Go back into the wings; my rôle is about to begin."

XXI

FOR more than an hour after Raoul's departure, Madame Fauvel remained in that benumbed condition, bordering on absolute insensibility, which follows great mental crises and intense physical pain. She returned by slow degrees to a realization of her position, and with the faculty of thinking the faculty of suffering returned to her. The horrible pressure to which she had been subjected appeared before her mind with extraordinary vividness, and the most trivial circumstances, even those that had passed unperceived at the time, made a deep impression upon her. She understood now that she had been the dupe of a detestable comedy; that Raoul had tortured her in cold blood, with premeditation, playing with her suffering, speculating upon her love for him.

But had Prosper, or had he not, connived at the robbery in which Raoul had just made her an accomplice? In Madame Fauvel's eyes that was the all-

important question. Ah! Raoul had struck home, the villain! Having at first rejected the idea of the cashier's complicity, she returned to it and clung to it. Who, if not he, could have divulged the word and placed a considerable sum of money in the safe, which, according to his employer's positive orders, should have been empty?

What she had heard of Prosper's conduct made Raoul's assertion probable, and, being still blinded by her maternal love, she was glad to attribute to some other than her son the first idea of the crime. She had been told that Prosper loved one of those creatures who melt patrimonies in the fire of strange caprices and pervert the noblest natures. After that she could believe him to be capable of anything. Did she not know by experience how far one imprudent act may lead?

However, she found excuses for Prosper, if he were guilty, and confessed to herself that the whole responsibility rested upon her shoulders. Who had turned Prosper out of a house which he might well have looked upon as his own? Who had shattered the fragile edifice of his hopes and interfered with his chaste love? Who had hurried him into a life of dissipation, where perhaps he sought forgetfulness?

On reflection she could not make up her mind what course to pursue, whether she should or should not confide in Madeleine. Yielding to a fatal inspiration, she decided that Raoul's crime should remain her secret. As always, and although all her misfortunes were due to the perpetual fluctuations of her will, to the intermittent character of her energy, she haggled with what she knew to be an imperative duty, relying for a solution upon time, which had disappointed her hitherto.

So it was that, when Madeleine returned, about eleven o'clock, she said nothing to her and even succeeded in concealing every trace of suffering with sufficient skill to avoid questions. Nor did her calmness desert her when M. Fauvel and Lucien returned. And yet she had just had a horrible spasm of fear. It might occur to the banker to go down to the office to verify the cash in the safe; that very rarely happened, but it did happen sometimes.

As if by design, the banker talked of nothing but Prosper that night, of the grief it caused him to see him go wrong, of his anxiety on that subject, and of the reasons which, in his opinion, kept him away from the house. Luckily, while he was berating his cashier, M. Fauvel did not look at his wife or his niece. If he had done so he would have been puzzled by their strange expressions.

That night was destined to be one long, intolerable agony to Madame Fauvel.

"In six hours," she said to herself, "in three hours, in one hour, all will be discovered! Then what will happen?"

Daylight came, the house woke to life; she heard the servants going and coming. Then the sounds in the offices when they were opened, the arrival of the clerks. But when she tried to rise, she could not. An unconquerable weakness and severe pains forced her back upon her pillow. And there she lay and awaited the result, shivering, yet bathed in the sweat of agonizing suspense.

She was waiting thus, leaning over the edge of the bed, listening intently, when Madeleine, who had just left her, returned to the room. The poor girl was paler than the dead, her eyes had the gleam of delirium, she was quivering like the leaves of the aspen in

the wind. Madame Fauvel understood that the crime was discovered.

"You know what has happened, aunt, I suppose? Prosper is accused of theft, and the inspector is here and going to take him to prison."

A groan was Madame Fauvel's only reply.

"I recognize Raoul's hand or the marquis's in this business," continued the girl.

"What! how can you explain —"

"I don't know. One thing I do know, and that is that Prosper is innocent. I have just seen him and spoken with him. If he were guilty he would not have dared to look me in the face."

Madame Fauvel opened her mouth to confess everything; but she dared not.

"In Heaven's name, what do these monsters want of us," said Madeleine; "what sacrifices will they demand? It would have been much better to murder him — then I would have killed myself."

Madeleine was interrupted by the entrance of M. Fauvel. The banker was in such a rage that he could hardly speak.

"The villain," he stammered, "to dare to accuse me! To insinuate that I robbed myself! And that Marquis de Clameran, who seems to doubt my good faith!"

Thereupon, heedless of the impression produced upon the two women, he narrated all that had taken place.

"I had a presentiment of this last night," he concluded; "this is what dissipation leads to!"

On that day Madeleine's devotion to her aunt was subjected to a severe test. The noble-hearted girl saw the man she loved dragged in the dust; she believed in his innocence as firmly as in her own; she

believed that she knew who had devised the plot of which he was the victim, — and she did not open her mouth to defend him.

Madame Fauvel, however, divined her niece's suspicions; she felt that her illness was evidence in support of them, and, although deathly ill, she had the courage to get up to breakfast. It was a melancholy meal. No one ate. The servants walked on tiptoe, and talked in undertones, as in houses where some great disaster has happened.

About two o'clock M. Fauvel was in his private office when a clerk came up to inform him that the Marquis de Clameran wished to speak with him.

"What!" cried the banker, "he dares —" But he added, on reflection: "Ask him to come up."

The mere name of Clameran had sufficed to reawaken M. Fauvel's ill-appeased wrath. In the morning, having just been robbed, with his safe standing empty and a large payment staring him in the face, he had succeeded in imposing silence on his resentment; now he was determined to take his revenge, and he rejoiced in the prospect.

But the marquis declined to come upstairs. The clerk soon returned and announced that the unwelcome visitor was very desirous, for important reasons, to speak to M. Fauvel in the general offices.

"What new demand is this?" cried the banker.

And he went downstairs, irritated to the highest pitch, and seeing no reason to restrain his irritation.

M. de Clameran was waiting in the outer office, adjoining the counting-room. M. Fauvel walked straight to where he stood.

"What more do you want, monsieur?" he demanded roughly; "you have been paid, haven't you! I have your receipt."

To the great surprise of all the clerks and of the banker himself, the marquis seemed neither angered nor wounded by this apostrophe.

"You are severe to me, monsieur," he replied in a tone of studied deference, yet without humility, "but I deserve it. Indeed, that is why I have come. A man of feeling always suffers when he has put himself in the wrong; that is my case, monsieur, and I am glad that my past is such that I can admit it frankly, without running the risk of being called weak. My reason for insisting upon speaking with you here, and not in your private office, is this: as I behaved very ill to you in the presence of your clerks, I desire in their presence to beg you to accept my excuses."

Clameran's course was so unexpected, it was in such striking contrast to his customary arrogance, that the banker's astonishment made it difficult for him to find a few commonplace words of reply.

"Yes — in fact — I admit — your insinuations — certain suspicions —"

"This morning," continued the marquis, "I was for a moment exceedingly annoyed, and was unable to control myself. My hair is turning gray, it is true, but when my temper is aroused I am as violent and inconsiderate as I was at twenty. My words did not represent my real thoughts, I beg you to believe, and I bitterly regret them."

M. Fauvel, who was himself very quick-tempered and at the same time exceedingly amiable, was the man of all others to appreciate Clameran's conduct and to be touched by it. Moreover, a long life of scrupulous probity cannot be brought to nought by one rash remark. In the face of apologies so frankly offered, his anger melted away.

He offered Clameran his hand, saying: —

“Let us forget it all, monsieur.”

They conversed amicably for some minutes; Clameran explained why he had required his funds in such haste, and, as he took his leave, announced that it was his purpose to ask Madame Fauvel's permission to pay his respects to her.

“It will perhaps be taking too great a liberty,” he said with some hesitation, “after the shock she must have had this morning.”

“Oh! you need not hesitate,” replied the banker; “indeed I think that it will do her good to talk a little, and I am obliged to go out on account of this miserable business.”

Madame Fauvel was in the small salon where Raoul had threatened to kill himself the night before. She was half-reclining on a couch, for her indisposition was constantly increasing, and Madeleine was with her. When the servant announced M. Louis de Clameran, they both sprang to their feet, as if terrified by a ghastly apparition.

He had had time to prepare his countenance as he mounted the stairs. Whereas he had been almost jovial on leaving the banker, he was sad and solemn now.

He bowed; they offered him a chair, but he declined to sit.

“You will excuse me, mesdames,” he said, “for venturing to disturb you in your affliction, but I have a duty to perform.”

The two women were silent, seeming to await an explanation; whereupon he added, lowering his voice: —

“I know all!”

Madame Fauvel tried to stop him with a warning

gesture. She felt that he was about to reveal the secret which she had kept from her niece. But Louis did not choose to see the gesture. He seemed to be thinking only of Madeleine, who said to him:

"Explain yourself, monsieur."

"Only an hour ago," he replied, "I learned that on yesterday evening, Raoul, resorting to the most abominable violence, compelled his mother to give up the key of the safe to him and stole three-hundred and fifty thousand francs."

Wrath and shame brought a crimson flush to Madeleine's cheeks at these words. She leaned over her aunt, grasped her wrists, and shook them.

"Is this true?" she demanded in a low voice; "is this true?"

"Alas!" groaned Madame Fauvel, completely crushed.

Madeleine rose, confounded by such pitiable weakness.

"And you allowed them to accuse Prosper!" she cried; "you allowed him to be dishonored; he is in prison!"

"Forgive me!" murmured Madame Fauvel, "I was frightened, he insisted on killing himself. And then, you do not know — Prosper and he had an understanding."

"Oh!" cried Madeleine in a tone of utter abhorrence, "he told you that, and you actually believed it!"

Clamcran thought that it was a favorable moment for him to intervene.

"Unfortunately," he said, with evident distress, "unfortunately, your aunt does not calumniate M. Bertomy."

"Proofs, monsieur! proofs!"

"We have Raoul's admission."

"Raoul is a villain!"

"I know it only too well, but, after all, who told him the word, who left the money in the safe? M. Bertomy, beyond any question."

These arguments seemed in no wise to affect Madeleine.

"And now," said she, taking no pains to conceal a contempt which amounted to disgust, "do you know what has become of the money?"

There was no misunderstanding the meaning of that question. Emphasized with a significant glance, it meant:—

"You instigated the robbery, and you received the plunder."

This savage insult from a girl whom he loved so madly that, although he was the most prudent of criminals, he risked the profits of his crimes in order to possess her, was a stinging blow to Clameran, and he became livid. But his course was too clearly marked out for him to allow himself to be disconcerted.

"The day will come, mademoiselle," he said, "when you will regret having treated me so cruelly. I understand the exact significance of your question. Oh! don't take the trouble to deny it."

"I deny nothing, monsieur."

"Madeleine!" murmured Madame Fauvel, trembling with apprehension to see fuel added to the flame of the evil passions of the man who held her fate in his hands; "Madeleine, have pity!"

"Yes, mademoiselle is pitiless," said Clameran, sadly; "she inflicts a cruel punishment upon a man of honor, whose only fault consists in his having followed a dying brother's last wishes. And if you see

me here now, it is only because I am one of those who believe that all the members of a family should stand together."

Slowly he took from the breast-pockets of his overcoat several bundles of bank-notes and placed them on the mantel.

"Raoul stole 350,000 francs," he said; "here is that amount. It is more than half of my fortune. I would very gladly give all that remains to be sure that this crime will be the last."

Madeleine was too inexperienced to fathom Clameran's bold yet simple plan, and she was speechless; all her anticipations were routed. Madame Fauvel, on the other hand, accepted this restitution as their salvation.

"Thanks, monsieur," she said, taking Clameran's hands; "thanks; you are very kind."

A reflection of the joy he felt shone in Louis' eyes. But he exulted too soon. A moment's reflection had renewed all of Madeleine's distrust. This disinterestedness seemed to her altogether too noble for a man whom she deemed incapable of a generous sentiment, and it occurred to her that it probably concealed some snare.

"What shall we do with this money?" she asked.

"Return it to M. Fauvel, mademoiselle."

"Return it, monsieur? how, pray? To return it is to denounce Raoul, that is to say, to ruin my aunt. Take back your money, monsieur."

Clameran was far too shrewd to insist; he obeyed, and seemed to be about to withdraw.

"I understand your refusal," he said; "it is for me to find a way. But I will not take my leave, mademoiselle, without telling you how deeply your injustice has grieved me. I might, perhaps, have

expected a different sort of reception, after the promise you have deigned to give me."

"I will keep my promise, monsieur, but when you have given me sufficient guaranties, not before."

"Guaranties! Of what sort? Explain yourself, I pray you."

"How am I to know that, after my—marriage, Raoul will not come and threaten his mother anew? What will my dowry amount to for a man who has squandered more than a hundred thousand francs in four months? We are making a bargain; I give you my hand in exchange for my aunt's honor and life; before ratification, therefore, I say: Where are your guaranties?"

"Oh! I will give you such guaranties," cried Clameran, "that you cannot fail to acknowledge my good faith. Alas! you doubt my devotion; what can I do to prove it to you? Must I try to save M. Bertomy?"

"Thanks for your offer, monsieur," replied Madeleine, scornfully. "If Prosper is guilty, let him suffer; if he is innocent, God will protect him."

Madame Fauvel and her niece rose; it was a formal dismissal, and Clameran retired.

"What a character!" he said to himself; "what pride! Ask me for guaranties, indeed! Ah! if I did not love her so! But I do love her, and I propose to see the haughty creature at my feet. She is so beautiful! Faith! so much the worse for Raoul!"

Clameran had never been more exasperated. Madeleine's energetic conduct, which was not included in his calculations, had defeated the *coup de théâtre* on which he had relied, and had upset his shrewd provisions. He had too much experience to flatter himself now that he could intimidate so determined a creature. He realized that, while she had not fath-

omed his plans or grasped the full meaning of his manœuvres, she was sufficiently upon her guard to be secure against surprise or deception. Furthermore, it was clear that she would dominate Madame Fauvel by virtue of her undaunted firmness; would inspire her with her boldness, whisper her suspicions to her, and preserve her from further yielding to her weakness. Just at the moment when Louis was certain of winning, he found an unexpected adversary. The game must be begun anew. It was clear that Madeleine was resigned to the prospect of sacrificing herself for her aunt; but it was equally clear that she was determined to sacrifice nothing without full knowledge of what she was doing, and to leave nothing to chance on the faith of promises for the future.

Now, how was he to give her the guaranties she demanded? What measures should he take to place Madame Fauvel ostensibly and finally out of reach of Raoul's enterprises? Certainly, when he was once married, and Raoul a rich man, Madame Fauvel was not likely to be molested. But how was he to prove it to Madeleine? Exact knowledge of all the details of their base and criminal intrigue would have reassured her on that point; but was it possible to inform her of all those details, especially before the marriage? Clearly not. In that case, what guaranties was he to give her?

Clameran studied the question for a long time in all its aspects, exerting all the powers of his keen mind; he could think of nothing,—no possible compromise, no expedient. But he was not one of those hesitating natures whom an obstacle delays for whole weeks. When he could not unravel a situation, he cut it. Raoul was in his way; he swore that, by fair means or foul, he would rid himself of that embarrass-

sing confederate. But it was no easy matter to rid himself of Raoul, suspicious and cunning as he was. That consideration, however, did not cause Clameran to hesitate. He was spurred on by one of those passions which age renders terrible. The more certain he was of Madeleine's hatred and contempt for him, the more he loved her, desired her, was determined to possess her, — a mysterious but not infrequent phenomenon of the mind and the passions.

However, as a gleam of reason lighted up his diseased brain once more, he decided that he would do nothing abruptly. He felt that it would be well to await the result of Prosper's affair before taking any further action. Then too he was anxious to see Madame Fauvel again, or Madeleine, who, he thought, could not long avoid asking him for an interview.

On this last point he was mistaken once more. Reflecting coolly and naturally upon the latest acts of the two confederates, Madeleine said to herself that, for the present, they would go no farther. She realized now that resistance could have been no more disastrous than cowardly submission. She determined therefore to assume full and entire responsibility for the future, feeling sufficient confidence in her own courage to venture to oppose Raoul as well as Louis de Clameran.

That Madame Fauvel would resist she did not doubt, but she proposed to use, even to abuse if necessary, her influence, and to force her, in her own interest, to assume a firmer and more dignified attitude. And that is why the two women, having decided to wait for their adversaries, to watch their manœuvres, gave no sign of life. Concealing beneath a well-feigned indifference the secret of their suffering, they abandoned all attempts to obtain

information. Through M. Fauvel, however, they learned the result of Prosper's examinations, his persistent denials, the charges that were formulated against him, the hesitation of the examining magistrate, and, finally, his release for lack of sufficient evidence — as set forth in the order of discharge.

Since Clameran's attempt to make restitution Madame Fauvel had had no doubt of the cashier's guilt. She did not say a word; but inwardly she accused him of having seduced Raoul, that son whom she could not make up her mind to cease to love, of having led him astray and driven him into crime.

Madeleine, on the contrary, was sure of Prosper's innocence. So sure that when she learned that he was to be discharged, she summoned courage to ask her uncle for ten thousand francs on the plea of charity, and sent it to the unhappy victim of deceitful appearances, who, judging from all that she had heard, must be entirely without means. Her motive in advising Prosper to leave France, in the letter she sent with the money, — a letter formed of words cut from her prayer-book, — was that she realized that it would be impossible for him to live in France. Moreover, Madeleine was convinced that, sooner or later, she should be compelled to marry Clameran, and she preferred to know that the man whom she had formerly distinguished and chosen was far, very far away from her.

And yet, at the very moment when she yielded to this impulse of generosity, of which Madame Fauvel disapproved, the two poor women were struggling in an inextricable network of difficulties. The tradespeople, whose money Raoul had consumed, and who had supplied goods on credit for a long while, were insisting on the payment of their accounts. They

could not understand, they said, how it was that such a man as M. Fauvel should keep them waiting for what they considered trifling sums. They owed one two thousand francs, another one thousand, a third only five hundred. The butcher, the grocer, the wine-dealer appeared at the same time, and they had the greatest possible difficulty in inducing them to accept payments on account. Some of them threatened to go to the banker. Alas! Madame Fauvel was confronted by a deficit of nearly 15,000 francs.

Again, Madeleine and her aunt, who had abstained all winter from going into society in order to avoid the expense of new dresses, were unable to avoid attending the ball to be given by MM. Jandidier, M. Fauvel's intimate friends. How could they appear at that ball, which, to cap the climax, was to be a fancy dress ball, and where were they to obtain the money for their costumes? For those two women, who had never known what it was to want money, who had always had their hands full of gold, had reached that point in their inexperience of the commonplace yet formidable difficulties of life. It was a year since they had paid the dressmaker, and they owed her a large sum. Would she consent to give them further credit?

A lady's maid who had recently entered Madeleine's service, Palmyre Chocareille by name, relieved them from their dilemma. This girl, who seemed to have had a vast amount of experience of the minor discomforts of life, which are the only serious ones, divined, it may be, her mistress's anxiety. However that may have been, it is certain that, without being asked, she mentioned a very skilful dress-maker, who was just starting in business for herself, who had

some capital, and who would be very glad to furnish all that they required and to wait for her money, being repaid beforehand by the certainty that the patronage of the Fauvel ladies would make her reputation and bring her other customers.

But that was not all. Neither Madame Fauvel nor her niece could go to the ball entirely without jewelry. And all their jewels, without exception, had been taken away and pawned at the Mont-de-Piété by Raoul, who had kept the pawn-tickets.

Then it was that Madeleine conceived the idea of going to Raoul and urging him to use a part of the stolen money in redeeming the jewels he had extorted from his mother's weakness. She suggested this plan to her aunt, saying: —

“Make an appointment with Raoul; he won't dare to refuse you, and I will go.”

And two days later the courageous girl took a cab and, notwithstanding the horrible weather, actually drove to Vésinet. She had no suspicion then that M. Verduret and Prosper had followed her, and that they witnessed the interview from the top of a ladder.

This bold step on Madeleine's part was of no avail, however. Raoul declared that he had divided with Prosper, that his own share was all spent, and that he was penniless. He would not return the pawn-tickets even, and Madeleine had been forced to insist with all her energy to induce him to give her four or five, representing indispensable articles of trifling value.

This refusal Clameran had ordered, had forced upon him. He hoped that, in a moment of supreme distress, they would apply to himself. Raoul had obeyed, but only after a violent altercation, witnessed by Joseph Dubois, Clameran's new servant.

The two confederates were at this time on the worst possible terms. Clameran was looking about for some safe, if not honorable, means of getting rid of Raoul, and the younger rascal had a sort of presentiment of his companion's friendly intentions. Only the certainty of a great danger was capable of reconciling them, and that certainty they acquired at MM. Jandidier's ball.

Who was this mysterious clown, who, after his transparent allusions to Madame Fauvel's misfortunes, had said to Louis in such a strange tone: "I am your brother Gaston's friend"?

They could not imagine, but they were so thoroughly persuaded that he was an implacable enemy that on leaving the ball they tried to murder him. When, having followed him, they were thrown off the scent, they were terribly alarmed.

"We must look out," muttered Clameran; "we shall find out only too soon who that man is."

Thereupon Raoul had tried to induce him to give up Madeleine.

"No," he cried, "I will have her or die!"

They thought that, being forewarned, it would be difficult to catch them. But they did not know who the man was who was on their track.

THE DENOUEMENT

XXII

SUCH are the facts which, with almost incredible skill in the art of investigation, had been collected and arranged by the stout, jovial-faced man who had taken Prosper under his protection, — M. Verduret.

Reaching Paris at nine o'clock in the evening, not by the Lyon railway as he had announced, but by the Orléans line, M. Verduret repaired at once to the Hôtel du Grand-Archange, where he found the cashier awaiting him, consumed by impatience.

"Ah! you are going to hear an interesting story," he said, "and you are going to find out how far back into the past we must sometimes go to find the original causes of a crime. All things on this earth are connected by an invisible chain. If Gaston de Clameran had not gone to a little café in Tarascon for a glass of beer twenty years ago, your safe would not have been robbed three weeks ago. Valentine de la Verberie in 1866 pays the penalty for the knife-thrusts given for love of her about 1840. Nothing is lost or forgotten. If you wish more proof, listen."

And he began at once to tell his story, refreshing his memory with his notes and the voluminous manuscript he had drawn up.

M. Verduret had not had twenty-four hours of rest in a week, but he hardly showed it. His muscles of steel defied fatigue and the springs of his intellect were too solidly constructed ever to give way. Another man would have been completely shattered, but he stood erect and told his story with the contagious energy which was peculiar to him, acting, so to speak, the drama of which he unfolded the changing scenes, moved to tears or to passion, — to speak in theatrical language, "entering into the skin of each of the characters he brought upon the stage."

Prosper, for his part, listened attentively, astounded by his surprising lucidity, by his marvellous powers of exposition. He listened, and he asked himself if this narrative which explained everything to the most trifling details, which analyzed fleeting sensations,

which reconstructed conversations that must have been secret, were not a romance rather than an exact statement of actual facts.

Certainly all these explanations were ingenious, convincing, so far as their probability was concerned, and strictly logical; but upon what did they rest? Were they not the dream of a man with a vivid imagination?

M. Verduret occupied a great deal of time in telling his story; it was nearly four o'clock in the morning when he finished and exclaimed with an air of triumph: —

“And now they are on their guard; they are very sharp, but I snap my fingers at them, I have them, they are ours. Within a week, friend Prosper, you will be rehabilitated; I have promised your father.”

“Is it possible?” muttered the cashier, all of whose ideas were thrown into confusion; “is it possible?”

“What?”

“All this that you have told me.”

M. Verduret drew himself up like a man who is not at all accustomed to have his auditors doubt the accuracy of his information.

“Possible!” he cried, “why, it is truth itself, truth taken alive, and exposed to view all quivering.”

“What! such things can happen in Paris, in our midst, without—”

“*Parbleu!*” the stout man interrupted him; “you are young, my friend! many worse things than this happen — and you have no suspicion of it. You, and those like you, believe only in the horrors of the Assize Court. Bah! in the bright light of the *Gazette des Tribunaux* you see only the blood-stained melodramas of life, and the actors, despicable

scoundrels, are as cowardly as the knives or as stupid as the poisons they use. It is in the shadow of family life, often out of reach of the Code, that the real dramas, the truly painful dramas of our generation are acted; there traitors wear gloves, vile knaves cloak themselves in worldly consideration, and the victims die of despair, with a smile on their lips. But all this is a matter of common knowledge, and you are surprised."

"I am wondering how you have succeeded in discovering all these horrors."

"Ha! ha! when I set myself a task, I give myself up to it completely," he said, with a self-satisfied air. "Note this: a man of moderate intelligence who concentrates all his faculties, all the energy of his will upon a single object, almost always attains that object. Furthermore, I have certain little methods of my own."

"Still, one must have clews, and I can see none."

"True; one must have a light to guide him through the darkness of such an affair as this. But the flame of Clameran's glance when I mentioned his brother Gaston's name lighted my lantern. From that moment I marched straight to the solution of the problem as to a beacon light."

Prosper's eyes questioned and implored. He would have liked to know his protector's methods of investigation, for he still doubted, he dared not believe in the good-fortune that he promised him — public rehabilitation.

"Well!" said M. Verduret, "you would give a good deal, wouldn't you, to know how I arrived at the truth?"

"Yes, I confess it; it seems such a miracle to me!"

M. Verduret took the keenest enjoyment in Pros-

per's stupefaction. To be sure, he was neither a good judge nor a distinguished connoisseur in such matters; but a man is always flattered by sincere admiration, from whatever quarter it may come.

"Very good," he rejoined; "I will explain my system to you. There is not a trace of the miraculous about it. We worked together at the solution of the problem, so you know the reasoning which led me to suspect that Clameran had something to do with the crime. After that, with the facts of which I was certain, the task was easy enough. What did I do? I placed people upon whom I could depend with those whom I was interested in watching; Joseph Dubois with Clameran, Nina Gypsy with the Fauvel ladies."

"True; and I am still at a loss to understand how Nina consented to undertake that employment."

"That is my secret," M. Verduret replied. "I resume. Having good eyes and sharp ears on the spot, sure of knowing all about the present, it became necessary for me to investigate the past, and I started for Beaucaire. The next day I was at Clameran, and at the first shot I put my hand on Saint-Jean, the former valet's son. He's a fine fellow, on my word! as frank as the osier, and as simple-minded as nature herself; and he at once guessed that I wanted to buy madder —"

"Madder!" interposed Prosper, completely bewildered.

"Certainly, any one could see that. I ought to say that I did n't look exactly as I do at this moment. He having madder to sell — another foregone conclusion — we began to haggle. The dispute lasted a whole day, in the course of which we drank a round dozen bottles. At supper-time Saint-Jean was as

drunk as a lord, and I had bought 900 francs' worth of madder, which your father will sell again."

There was such a singular expression on Prosper's face that M. Verduret laughed aloud.

"I had risked nine hundred francs," he continued, "but, by hook or by crook, I had learned the whole history of the Clamerans, Gaston's love-affair, his flight, and Louis' fall from his horse. I also learned that Louis had returned about a year ago, that he had sold the château to a farmer named Fougeroux, and that the purchaser's wife, Mihonne, had made an appointment to meet Louis. That same evening I crossed the Rhône, and called on Mihonne. Poor woman! her cur of a husband has beaten her so that she's not far removed from an idiot. I convinced her that I came on behalf of some Clameran or other, and she was eager to tell me all she knew."

Prosper was confounded by the simplicity of these methods of investigation.

"After that," continued M. Verduret, "I had the right end of the thread and could disentangle the skein. It remained to know what had become of Gaston. I had no difficulty in finding his trail. Lafourcade, who is a friend of your father's, told me that he had settled at Oloron, and bought an iron foundry there, and that he died there. Thirty-six hours later I was at Oloron."

"In God's name, are you absolutely beyond the reach of fatigue?"

"No, but it's my rule to strike the iron while it's hot. At Oloron I fell in with Manuel, who was passing a few days there on his way to Spain, and from him I learned Gaston's biography, step by step, and the most minute details concerning his death. From Manuel I also learned of Louis' visit, and an inn-

keeper in the town told me of the visit to his house about that time of a young mechanic, in whom I recognized Raoul."

"But the conversations," queried Prosper, "these verbatim conversations?"

"You fancy that I took them out of my hat, eh? You are wrong. While I was at work down yonder, my lieutenants here did not put their hands in the same glove. Being mutually distrustful, Clameran and Raoul were shrewd enough to keep the letters they received. Those letters Joseph Dubois found; he copied the majority of them, had the most important ones photographed, and sent them all to me. For her part, Nina passed her time listening at keyholes, and sent me a faithful summary of what she heard. And finally, I had in the Fauvel household one other means of investigation, which I will reveal to you later."

All this was clear, precise, indisputable.

"I understand," muttered Prosper, "I understand."

"And now, my young friend," said M. Verduret, "what have you been doing?"

At this question Prosper lost countenance and blushed. But he realized that to conceal his imprudence would be madness and a despicable deed.

"Alas!" he replied, "I have made a fool of myself; I read in a newspaper that Clameran was going to marry Madeleine."

"And then?" demanded M. Verduret, with evident uneasiness.

"I wrote M. Fauvel an anonymous letter, in which I gave him to understand that his wife was false to him with Raoul."

With a violent blow of his fist M. Verduret shattered the table at which they were seated.

"Wretch!" he cried; "it may be that you have ruined everything!"

The stout man's face was transformed in a twinkling. His jovial features assumed a threatening expression. He left his chair and strode fiercely up and down the best room in the Grand-Archange, heedless of the lodgers on the floor below.

"Why, you're a mere child," he said to the panic-stricken Prosper, "a madman — worse than that — a fool!"

"Monsieur!"

"Think of it! when you are drowning, a brave man happens along, jumps into the water, and, when he's trying to save you, you cling to his legs so that he can't swim! What did I tell you?"

"To keep quiet and not go out."

"Well!"

The consciousness of being in the wrong made Prosper more shame-faced than the schoolboy whose teacher asks him how he has passed his hours for study, and who tries to excuse himself.

"It was at night, monsieur," he said; "I was feeling wretchedly, so I went out and walked along the quays; I thought I might venture to go into a café; they gave me a newspaper and I saw the horrible news."

"Was n't it agreed that you should have confidence in me?"

"You were absent, monsieur, and the announcement of that marriage upset me completely; you were far away, unexpected things might happen —"

"Nothing is unexpected except to idiots!" M. Verduret declared peremptorily. "Write an anonymous letter indécemment! Do you know what risk you expose me to? Through your fault I shall perhaps

fail to keep a sacred promise I have made to one of the very few people on earth whom I esteem. I shall be thought a knave, a coward — I, who — ”

He checked himself as if he were afraid of saying too much, and it was a considerable time before he spoke again, having meanwhile become comparatively calm.

“ It is foolish to cry over spilled milk. Let us try to get out of this scrape. Where and when did you mail your letter? ”

“ Last evening on Rue du Cardinal-Lemoine. Ah! it was not at the bottom of the box when I regretted it! ”

“ It would have been better to regret it earlier. What time was it? ”

“ About ten o'clock. ”

“ That is to say, your bomb-shell reached M. Fauvel this morning with his mail; he was probably alone in his office, therefore, when he broke the seal and read it. ”

“ That is more than probable, it is certain. ”

“ Do you remember the exact words of your letter? Now don't get confused, for this is very important; try and think. ”

“ Oh! I don't need to think. The words are as fresh in my memory as if I had just written them. ”

He repeated his letter to M. Fauvel accurately and almost verbatim. M. Verduret listened with the most careful attention, and the wrinkles on his forehead betrayed the working of his mind.

“ That was a stiff anonymous letter, ” he muttered, “ for a man who does n't make it his business. It leaves everything to be implied, without giving any precise information; it is vague, sneering, treacherous. Repeat it once more. ”

Prosper complied, and his second version did not vary.

"You put everything in," said the stout man, repeating the different sentences after Prosper. "Nothing could be more disquieting than that reference to the cashier. That question, 'Was it he, too, who stole Madame Fauvel's diamonds?' is simply horrible. What could be more maddening than that ironical advice, 'If I were in your place, I would not make a scandal; I would keep an eye on my wife'?"

His voice sank to a whisper, and he pursued his soliloquy inwardly. At last he planted himself in front of Prosper with his arms folded.

"The effect of your letter must have been terrible," he said; "but let us go on. Your employer is very passionate, is he not?"

"He is violence itself."

"In that case, perhaps, the harm you have done is not irreparable."

"What! you imagine —"

"I think that any man who is naturally violent is afraid of himself and never obeys his first impulse. Therein is our hope of salvation. If, on receipt of your bomb-shell, M. Fauvel was unable to contain himself, if he rushed into his wife's room, shrieking, 'Where are your diamonds?' why, good-bye to our plans. I know Madame Fauvel, she will make a clean breast of everything."

"Would that be such a great misfortune?"

"Yes, my young comrade, because at the first loud word between Madame Fauvel and her husband our birds will fly away."

Prosper had not foreseen that possibility.

"And in the second place," continued M. Verduret, "it would be the cause of intense suffering —"

"To some one whom I know?"

"Yes, my young friend, whom you know very well. And lastly, I should be distressed beyond measure to see those two blackguards make tracks without being fully informed in regard to them."

"Why, I should say that you know all that there is to know."

M. Verduret shrugged his shoulders.

"Have n't you noticed the gaps in my story?" he said.

"None at all."

"Then you cannot have listened closely. In the first place did Louis de Clameran poison his brother or did he not?"

"Why, yes, I am sure that he did, after what you have told me."

"Oho! you are more positive than I venture to be, young man. Your opinion agrees with mine, but what decisive proof have we? None. I questioned Doctor C——, with considerable skill, I make bold to believe. He has not the shadow of a suspicion. And Doctor C—— is no charlatan, he's a learned man, an active practitioner and keen observer. What poisons produce the effects described? I know of none. And yet I have studied many poisons, from La Pommeraye's digitalis to La Sauvresy's aconitine."

"But his death happened so opportunely —"

"That one cannot help believing in a crime? True, but chance is sometimes a wonderfully obliging accomplice. That's the first point. In the second place, I don't know Raoul's antecedents."

"Is it necessary to know them?"

"Indispensable, my friend. But we shall know them before long. I have sent one of my men — pardon me, one of my friends — to London; a very

shrewd man, M. Pâlot, and he has written me that he is on the trail. Really I shall not be sorry to learn the epic of that sceptical, sentimental young rascal, who would be an honest, excellent boy perhaps, but for Clameran."

Prosper was no longer listening. M. Verduret's assured manner restored his confidence; already he saw the real culprits in the hands of the law, and he smacked his lips in anticipation of that assize court drama in which his innocence would be proven and he would be publicly rehabilitated after being publicly dishonored. More than all else, he would find Madeleine again; for he could understand her conduct, her reticence at the dressmaker's; he was sure that she had not for an instant ceased to love him.

This certainty of future happiness was calculated to restore and did in fact restore his self-possession, which he had lost when he discovered that his employer's safe had been rifled. And for the first time he was conscious of a feeling of amazement at his strange situation.

Those events which disconcert all human provisions are remarkable in that they overturn one's ideas and raise them to the level of the most extraordinary situations. Prosper, who had at first simply wondered at M. Verduret's protection and at the extent of his means of investigation, began now to wonder what secret motives lay behind his action. What was the explanation of that man's devotion, and what reward did he expect for his services?

So absorbing was the cashier's perplexity that he suddenly exclaimed: —

"You no longer have the right to conceal your identity from me, monsieur. When you have given back to a man his honor and his life, when you have

saved him, you ought to tell him whom he is to thank and bless."

Roused thus abruptly from his meditations, the stout man started.

"Oh!" he said, with a smile, "you're not out of difficulty yet, nor married, are you? So have patience and faith for a few more days."

The clock struck six.

"The devil!" cried M. Verduret, "six o'clock already, and when I arrived I hoped to have a long night's sleep! But this is no time to sleep."

He left the room and leaned over the stair-rail.

"Madame Alexandre!" he called. "I say, Madame Alexandre!"

The landlady of the Grand-Archange, the portly spouse of M. Fanferlot, *alias* The Squirrel, was not in bed. That circumstance impressed Prosper. She appeared, humble, smiling, eager to be of service.

"What can I do for you, messieurs?" she asked.

"As soon as possible," replied M. Verduret, "I must see your—Joseph Dubois, and Palmyre too. Send word to them. Wake me when they come, for I am going to rest a bit."

Madame Alexandre had not reached the foot of the stairs before M. Verduret had thrown himself without ceremony on Prosper's bed.

"You will excuse me, won't you?" he said.

Five minutes later he was asleep, and Prosper, stretched out in an easy-chair, was wondering, more puzzled than ever, who this savior could be.

It was hardly nine o'clock when there were three light taps on the chamber door. Faint as the sound was, it was sufficient to rouse M. Verduret, who jumped from the bed, saying:—

"Who is there?"

But Prosper, who had been unable to close his eyes in his chair, had already opened the door. Joseph Dubois, the Marquis de Clameran's servant, entered the room. M. Verduret's lieutenant was breathing hard like a man who has been running, and his little cat's-eyes were more restless and shifty than usual.

"Here you are again at last, patron!" he cried; "at last you are here to advise me again. When you were away I didn't know what saint to pray to; I was like a jumping-jack when his thread is broken!"

"What! you allow yourself to be unhorsed like this!"

"*Dame!* just consider that I didn't know where to find you. Yesterday afternoon I sent three despatches to the addresses you gave me, at Lyon, Beaucaire, and Oloron, and got no reply. I was beginning to feel as if I should go mad, when somebody came to say you were here."

"Things are getting warm, eh?"

"Burning, patron, burning, and the place is no longer tenable, on my word!"

While speaking, M. Verduret readjusted his clothing, which had become slightly disarranged during his sleep. When he had finished he threw himself into an easy-chair, while Joseph Dubois remained standing respectfully, cap in hand, in the attitude of a soldier making a report, without his musket.

"Explain yourself, my boy," said M. Verduret, "and in a hurry if you please; no useless phrases."

"All right, patron. I don't know what your intentions are, nor what means of striking you may have, but you must finish up, strike your final blow, quickly, very quickly."

"That's your opinion, is it, Master Joseph?"

"Yes, patron, because, if you wait, if you hesitate, if you back and fill, good evening all! you will find nothing but an empty cage, the birds will have flown. You smile? Oh! I know that you're very shrewd, but they're a sly pair, too."

"But did n't you mention them at the prefecture, when I wrote you?"

"Yes, but they're the kind of people that slip through your fingers like an eel. They know that somebody's on their tracks."

"Ten thousand devils!" cried M. Verduret; "then some one must have bungled!"

This conversation was too transparent not to afford Prosper much food for reflection; so he listened with all his ears, observing the assured superiority of M. Verduret's manner, and the deference, evidently perfectly sincere, of the servant.

"There has been no bungling," rejoined Joseph; "the suspicion of our rascals dates from a long way back, as you yourself have occasion to know, patron. They suspected something the night you were disguised as a clown; witness the stab they gave you. Since then they have slept with one eye open. However, they were beginning to feel a little more secure, I think, when, yesterday, on my word! the mine exploded with a vengeance."

"And that is why you sent me the despatches?"

"Naturally. Listen to what happened. Yesterday morning, when he got out of bed, that is to say about ten o'clock, my honorable employer thought fit to arrange his papers, which are locked up in a cabinet in the salon, a cabinet belonging to him, which, by the way, has a lock that has given me a deal of trouble. Meanwhile I was pretending to fix the fire,

and watching him out of the corner of my eye. Patron, that man has the American eye! At the first glance he saw, or rather divined, that some one had touched the infernal papers. He turned as white as a sheet, and he rapped out an oath, — such an oath!”

“Go on, go on!”

“Very good! How did he discover my little investigations? That’s a mystery. You know how careful I am. I had put everything in order again, with such a light touch, such care! Thereupon, in order to make sure that he’s not mistaken, my marquis sets about examining all the letters one by one, turning them over and smelling them. I was tempted to offer him a microscope. But he did n’t need one, the rascal. Suddenly, up he jumps with fire in his eye, sends his chair to the other end of the salon with a kick, and rushes at me, yelling: ‘Somebody has been here! somebody has tampered with my papers and photographed this letter!’ Br-r-r! I’m no more of a coward than the next man, but all my blood gave a jump; I fancied myself dead, massacred, chopped in pieces. I even said to myself: ‘Fanfer — I mean Dubois, my boy, your time has come!’ And I thought of Madame Alexandre!”

M. Verduret had become serious. He reflected, allowing the worthy Joseph to analyze and set forth his individual sensations.

“Go on,” he said at last.

“I got off with nothing worse than a fright, patron; the villain dared not touch me. To be sure, being exceedingly prudent, I had put myself out of his reach, and we talked with the large table in the middle of the salon between us. While I was wondering how he had discovered the jar of roses, I defended myself like a good one. I said: —

"‘That can’t be true; monsieur le marquis is mistaken; it is n’t possible.’

"The devil! he did n’t listen to me; he brandished a letter and said again: —

"‘This letter has been photographed; I have proof of it.’

"He was not mistaken, the dear man. As he spoke he pointed to a little yellow spot on the paper. ‘Smell of that!’ he shouted; ‘smell! it’s — it’s — He told me the name, but I’ve forgotten it; it’s some drug that photographers use, it seems.’

"I know, I know," interposed M. Verduret. "What then?"

"Then, patron, we had a scene, oh, such a scene! He ended by taking me by the collar and shook me like a plum-tree to make me tell who I am, what I know, where I come from, — as if I knew! I had to tell him just how I had employed my time, almost to a minute, since I entered his service. The black-guard was born to be an examining magistrate. Then he sent for the hotel servant who has charge of his rooms and questioned him, but in English, so that I did n’t understand, you see. At last, however, he calmed down, and when the man had gone, he gave me a twenty-franc piece, saying: ‘Here, take this; I am sorry I was so short with you; you’re too stupid for the trade I suspected you of practising.’"

"He said that to you?"

"In almost those very words, yes, patron, speaking to my face."

"And you believe he meant it?"

"I am sure of it."

The stout man whistled gently in a way that indicated that such was not his opinion.

"If you take it so," he retorted, "Clameran was right, and you are stupid."

It was easy to see that the worthy Joseph Dubois was on fire with the longing to give his reasons for his opinion, but he dared not.

"After all," he said, altogether discomfited, "it is quite possible. However, that affair being settled, monsieur le marquis dressed to go out. But he did not order his carriage, and I saw him take a cab in the courtyard of the hotel. Frankly, I felt very sure that I should not see him again for a long while, that he was going to try the air of some other country. I was wrong. He returned about five o'clock, gay as a lark. While he was away I went to the telegraph office."

"What! you did not follow him?"

"Excuse me, patron, one of our — friends shadowed him; I made sure of that. Indeed, through that friend I know what our rascal did. He went first to a broker's office, then to the Comptoir d'Escompte, then to the Bank. It's easy to see that he's a capitalist! I have an idea that he was making arrangements for a little journey."

"And is that all?"

"In that direction, yes, patron. It is well for you to know, however, that our blackguards have been trying to have Mademoiselle Palmyre taken care of by the people over yonder, you understand. Luckily, you had anticipated that, and I had given warning at headquarters. Except for you, she would have been 'bottled up.'"

He stopped, with his nose in the air, thinking whether he had anything more to say. But, as nothing occurred to him, —

"There you are!" he cried. "I venture to hope

that M. Patrigent will rub his hands hard at my next call. He does n't expect the evidence that is going to swell the size of his file 113."

There was a long silence. As honest Joseph had conjectured, the decisive moment had arrived, and M. Verduret was arranging his plan of battle pending the report of Nina, who had become Palmyre once more, which report would settle his point of attack. But Joseph Dubois was impatient and anxious.

"What am I to do now, patron?" he asked.

"You must return to the hotel, my boy; your master will very probably have noticed your absence, but he won't mention it to you; you will continue therefore —"

He was interrupted by an exclamation from Prosper, who was standing near the window.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Clameran! over there!" Prosper replied.

With one bound M. Verduret and Joseph were at the window.

"Where do you see him?" said they.

"Yonder, at the corner of the bridge, behind that orange woman's booth."

Prosper was not mistaken. It was in very truth the nobly born Marquis Louis de Clameran, who stood behind the temporary booth, watching those who went in and out of the Grand-Archange, and waiting for his servant.

It was some little time before they could make sure of his identity, for he kept out of sight very cleverly, as if he were accustomed to such hazardous expeditions. But there came a moment when, being pushed and elbowed by the crowd, he was obliged to step off the sidewalk and show himself openly

"Was I right?" cried the cashier; "is it still possible to doubt?"

"True!" muttered Joseph, convinced at last; "it is beyond belief."

M. Verduret, for his part, seemed in no wise surprised.

"So the game has turned hunter," he said. "Well, Joseph, my boy, do you still persist in thinking that your honorable employer was fooled by your imitations of Jocrisse?"

"You assured me of the contrary, patron," replied Dubois, in the most humble tone, "and after you have asserted a thing proofs are useless."

"However," continued the stout man, "this step, rash as it seems, was inevitable. The fellow knows that we are after him, and naturally enough he wants to know who his enemies are. Do you understand now how he must suffer from this uncertainty? Perhaps he fancies that they who are tracking him are simply some old confederates of his, half-starved, who would like a small slice of the cake. He will stay there till Joseph goes out, and then he will come here and make inquiries."

"But I can go out without his seeing me, patron!"

"Yes, I know; you can climb the low wall between the Grand-Archange and the wine-merchant's yard; from there you can go through the paper-maker's underground passage and slip away through Rue de la Huchette."

The excellent Joseph assumed the indescribable expression of a man who suddenly receives a bucketful of iced water on his head, not knowing whence it comes.

"That's it exactly, patron," he stammered. "They told me over yonder that you knew every house in Paris like that. Is it true?"

Prosper's stout friend did not deign to reply. He was asking himself what immediate advantage could be derived from Clameran's manœuvre. As for the cashier, he listened, open-mouthed, looking from one to the other of these two strangers, who, without apparent self-interest, exerted themselves with as much passion as he himself felt, to win the difficult game in which his honor, his happiness, and his life were at stake.

"There is still another way," said Joseph, who had been reflecting too.

"What is it?"

"I can go out openly, with my hands in my pockets, and stroll back to the Hotel du Louvre."

"And what then?"

"Why, Clameran will come and question Madame Alexandre, and, if you have taught her her lesson, you know how cunning she is; she'll bamboozle our man in such fashion that he won't know what to think."

"A bad plan!" pronounced M. Verduret, in a peremptory tone; "you can't fool a fellow who is in such great danger, and to set his mind at rest is hardest of all."

The stout man's plan was formed; in the curt tone which admits of no rejoinder, he continued:—

"I have something better. Has Clameran seen Lagors since he found out that his papers have been tampered with?"

"No, patron."

"He may have written to him."

"I would stake my head that he has n't. According to your instructions, having to keep a particularly sharp eye on his correspondence, I arranged a little system which puts me on my guard as soon

as he touches a pen; but the pens have not been moved for twenty-four hours."

"Clameran went out yesterday for a part of the afternoon."

"He did n't write while he was out; the man who followed him vouches for that."

"In that case," cried the stout man, "forward! forward! Go down, and be as quick as you can. I will give you fifteen minutes to get up another face, the face of one of the people over yonder, you know; I will keep an eye on our man from here."

Without hesitation, without a word, Joseph disappeared, light-footed as a sylph; and M. Verduret and Prosper remained near the window, watching Clameran, who appeared or disappeared according to the capricious ebb and flow of the crowd, but who seemed determined not to abandon his post until he had obtained some information.

"Why do you devote your attention to the marquis exclusively?" queried Prosper.

"Because, my friend, because —"

M. Verduret tried to invent some good reason, some specious pretext; but finding none, he lost his temper and added roughly: —

"That is my business."

He had given Joseph Dubois fifteen minutes to effect a metamorphosis; ten had not passed when he reappeared. Of the dapper manservant in the red waistcoat, with whiskers *à la* Bergami and manners at once surly and self-satisfied, absolutely nothing remained. The man who had taken his place was one of those the mere sight of whom alarms the most innocent thieves and makes them fly away like crows. His black cravat, twisted like a piece of string around a paper collar of doubtful cleanliness and adorned

with a "paste" pin, his black frock-coat buttoned to the chin, his shabby hat, his boots polished so brilliantly that a coquette could have seen herself in them, and lastly his heavy cane betrayed the subordinate employé of the bureau on Rue de Jerusalem as clearly as the color of the trousers betrays the soldier. Joseph Dubois vanished, and from his livery came forth the crafty Fanferlot, *alias* The Squirrel, triumphant and radiant.

When he entered the room Prosper could not restrain an exclamation of surprise, almost of alarm. He had recognized the little man who assisted the inspector in his search on the day of the robbery.

M. Verduret meanwhile examined his lieutenant with evident satisfaction.

"Not bad," he said approvingly, "not bad. His whole person exhales an odor of police calculated to make an honest man shudder. You understood me; this is how I wanted you to make up."

The compliment seemed to delight Joseph Dubois.

"Now that I am dressed, patron, what am I to do?" he asked.

"Nothing difficult for a clever man. But observe that the success of my plan depends on the precision with which the manœuvres are executed. Before turning my attention to Lagors, I want to be done with Clameran; and, since the scoundrels are separated, we must prevent them from coming together again."

"I understand," said Fanferlot, with a wink; "I am to effect a diversion."

"Exactly. You will go out by way of Rue de la Hachette and go around to Pont Saint-Michel. There you will go down to the shore and station yourself on one of the flights of stairs leading to the

quay, very awkwardly, so that Clameran can see you from where he stands, and realize that, while he is playing the spy, somebody is spying him. If he does n't see you, you are sharp enough to attract his attention."

"*Parbleu!* I will throw a stone into the water."

Delighted by his idea, Dubois-Fanferlot rubbed his hands.

"A stone will do," rejoined M. Verduret. "As soon as Clameran sees you, he will take fright and decamp. You will follow him, apparently in a very bungling way, but with the utmost persistence. Realizing that he has to do with the police, he will be thoroughly frightened and will risk everything to throw you off the scent. That is why you will have to keep your eyes open; he's a crafty dog."

"All right! I was n't born yesterday."

"So much the better! you must prove it to him. This much is sure, that, feeling that you are at his heels, he won't dare to return to the Hôtel du Louvre, fearing lest he may find some too inquisitive people there. That is the important point, in my view."

"But suppose he should go there, after all?"

The stout man seemed to be pondering the suggestion.

"That is not probable," he replied. "However, if he should be bold enough for that, you must let him alone, wait for him, and follow him again when he comes out. But he won't do it. He will be more likely to think of taking some railroad train. In which case you must cling to him though he should lead you to Siberia. Have you any money?"

"I will get some from Madame Alexandre."

"Very good! I will not scrutinize your account too closely. By the way — another word. If the vil-

lain takes to the railroad, send me a line here. Furthermore, if he keeps you at his heels till evening, beware of lonely places after dark. The hound is capable of anything."

"Can I shoot him?"

"Stop at that! no child's play. Unless he should attack you. Now, my boy, off you go."

When Dubois-Fanferlot had left the room, M. Verduret and Prosper resumed their post of observation.

"Why take so much pains?" muttered the cashier. "I had n't half the charges against me that are hanging over Clameran, and they did n't make so much fuss —"

"What!" rejoined the stout man; "don't you understand yet that I am trying to separate Raoul's case from the marquis's? But hush! look!"

Clameran had left his post of observation and approached the parapet of the bridge, where he walked back and forth as if he were trying to see clearly something which seemed strange to him.

"Ah!" muttered M. Verduret, "he has caught sight of our man."

In truth, Clameran's uneasiness was very manifest; he took a few steps as if he intended to cross the bridge; then, upon reflection, suddenly turned around and darted in the direction of Rue Saint-Jacques.

"He is caught!" cried M. Verduret, in high glee.

But at the same moment a noise at the door caused both him and Prosper to turn. Madame Nina Gypsy — in other words, Palmyre Chocareille — was standing in the middle of the room.

Poor Nina! each day that had passed since she entered Madeleine's service had had the effect of a year upon her lovely face. Tears had extinguished the amorous fire of her great black eyes; her rosy cheeks

had grown pale and hollow, the smile had frozen upon her lips, once so inviting, and redder than the open pomegranate. Poor Gypsy! she who was formerly so cheery, so active, was crushed now beneath the burden of sorrows too heavy for her to bear. She who had displayed all the insolence of happiness was as humble as poverty.

Prosper imagined that she would be so beside herself with joy at seeing him again, so proud of having generously sacrificed herself for him, that she would throw herself on his neck and embrace him frantically. He was mistaken; and although he was devoted to Madeleine, heart and soul, since he had known the reasons of her harshness, the thwarting of his expectations touched him. For Madame Gypsy seemed hardly to recognize him. She bowed to him timidly, almost as if he were a stranger. Her whole attention was concentrated upon M. Verduret. The glance she bestowed upon him had the shrinking, affectionate timidity of the poor beast who is often maltreated by his master.

He, however, was most amiable to her, assuming an affectionate, fatherly air.

"Well, my dear child," he said in his kindest voice, "what information have you for me?"

"There must be something new in the house, monsieur, and I was very anxious to notify you, but I was kept at home by my duties and Mademoiselle Madeleine had to invent a pretext for me to go out."

"You will thank Mademoiselle Madeleine for her confidence," rejoined the stout man, "pending the time when I can express all my gratitude to her in person. I am confident that she is faithful to our agreements."

"Yes, monsieur."

"She receives the Marquis de Clameran?"

"Since the date of the marriage was fixed, he comes every evening, and mademoiselle receives him very courteously. He seems overjoyed."

These statements, which overturned all Prosper's ideas, drove him frantic with indignation. The poor fellow, having no comprehension of M. Verduret's shrewd manœuvres, feeling that he was tossed about at the pleasure of designs which he could not explain, suddenly found himself betrayed, ridiculed, cheated.

"What!" he cried, "that vile Marquis de Clameran, that infamous thief, that murderer is admitted to M. Fauvel's house on terms of intimacy, and is paying court to Madeleine! In God's name, what did you tell me, monsieur? What were the hopes with which you put my fears to sleep?"

M. Verduret, with an imperious gesture, cut short his recriminations.

"Enough," he said, "enough of this. You are far too — honest a man, after all, my friend. If you are incapable of making any serious attempt to secure your own rehabilitation, at least allow those who are at work for you to act, without incessantly annoying them with your childish suspicions. Don't you think that you have done enough to embarrass me?"

Having administered this reproof, he turned to Gypsy again, and said in a softer tone: —

"Between you and me, my dear child, what have you learned?"

"Why, nothing definite, monsieur, unfortunately, nothing that will solve your doubts, and I am in despair about it, believe me."

"But you said that something serious had happened, my child."

Madame Gypsy made a gesture of discouragement.

"I mean, monsieur," she replied, "that I suspect something, that I feel that there is something. What is it? I am unable to say, or to express clearly what I mean. Perhaps it is simply an absurd presentiment which makes everything appear to me in an extraordinary light. It seems to me that misfortune is hanging over the house, that we are approaching the dénouement. It is impossible now to extort anything from Madame Fauvel; she is like a body without a soul; and I would swear that she distrusts her niece, that she is concealing something from her."

"And M. Fauvel?"

"I was just going to speak of him, monsieur. Something has happened to him, or I will put my hand in the fire. Since yesterday morning he's a different man. He goes in and out, and can't seem to stay in one place; you would say he was insane. His voice is changed, so changed that mademoiselle noticed it, and spoke to me about it; and M. Lucien has noticed it too. He has always been so kind and indulgent, and now he is irritable and nervous and cross. He seems as if he were all ready to break out and is all the time holding himself back. And his eyes, which I have noticed very carefully, have a strange, indescribable expression, which becomes positively terrible when he looks at madame. Last evening, as soon as M. de Clameran arrived, monsieur left the room abruptly, saying that he had some work to do."

A triumphant exclamation from M. Verduret interrupted Madame Gypsy. He was fairly radiant.

"I say!" he said to Prosper, forgetting his ill-humor of a moment before, "I say! what did I tell you?"

"It is true, monsieur —"

"The unfortunate man distrusted his first impulse, as I anticipated. He is on the lookout now, watching for proofs in support of your letter. And when I say proofs—he probably has them already. Did the ladies go out yesterday?"

"Yes, for part of the day."

"What did M. Fauvel do?"

"He remained at home alone; the ladies took me with them."

"There's no doubt about it!" cried the stout man. "He must have watched, yes, and found, *pardieu!* some very decisive indications in support of your letter. Ah! Prosper, you misguided youth! your letter is making us a deal of trouble!"

M. Verduret's reflections suddenly cast a bright light into Madame Gypsy's mind.

"Ah! I see!" she said; "M. Fauvel knows all."

"That is to say, he thinks he knows all, and what has been told him is more horrible than the truth."

"In that case I can understand the order M. Cavaillon claims to have overheard."

"What order?"

"M. Cavaillon declares that he heard M. Fauvel order his valet, Évariste, on pain of immediate discharge, to hand all the letters that came to the house to him and nobody else; no matter where they come from, or to whom they are addressed."

"If that is so," observed Prosper, whose thoughts were guided by his very comprehensible egotism, "if that is so, everything will soon be discovered, and it would be much better to confess—"

Once more a withering glance from M. Verduret cut him short.

"When," he inquired, "did young Cavaillon hear him give this order?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"That is what I feared," cried M. Verduret; "it is clear that he has chosen his course and that he dissembles now, in order to revenge himself more surely. Shall we arrive in time to defeat his plans? Is it still possible to fasten over his eyes a bandage so thick that he can be made to believe that the anonymous letter is false?"

He paused. Prosper's folly, excusable though it was, had defeated the exceedingly simple plan he had formed at first, and now his alert mind was in search of another expedient.

"Thanks for your information, my dear child," he said at last; "I must make up my mind, for inaction would be terribly dangerous at this moment. Do you return at once. Don't forget that M. Fauvel supposes you to be in the secret. So be prudent, and at the slightest incident, no matter how trivial, send me a line."

But Nina, although dismissed, did not go.

"And Caldas, monsieur?" she said, very timidly.

It was the third time within a fortnight that Prosper had heard that name. The first time was in the corridor of the Prefecture of Police, when a middle-aged man of respectable appearance had whispered it in his ear, while promising him assistance and protection. Another time, the examining magistrate had thrown it in his face in connection with Gypsy. He had tried to remember the names of all the people he had known and forgotten, and it seemed to him as if that name were involved in some serious incident of his life; but what was it?

M. Verduret, the impassive M. Verduret, had given a nervous start, instantly repressed, when he heard the name.

"I promised you that you should see him again," he said, "and I will keep my promise. *Au revoir!*"

It was noon, and M. Verduret discovered that he was hungry. He summoned Madame Alexandre, and the omnipotent sovereign of the Grand-Archange soon laid a small table in front of the window, at which Prosper and his protector seated themselves. But neither a dainty breakfast cooked for love, nor Ostend oysters worthy of Baron Brisse, nor the excellent wine from behind the woodpile could smooth the wrinkles from M. Verduret's brow. To Madame Alexandre's eager and insinuating questions he replied simply:—

"Hush! hush! leave me!"

For the first time since he had known the stout man, Prosper surprised upon his face symptoms of anxiety and hesitation, and the exclamations and fragmentary sentences which he uttered from time to time betrayed his uncertainty.

Prosper's anxiety increased to such a pitch that he ventured to ask a question.

"I have embarrassed you terribly, have I not, monsieur?"

"Yes," M. Verduret replied, "'terribly' is the word. What ought we to do,—hasten events or wait for them? And I am bound by sacred pledges. Well, I shall not get out of this without the help of the examining magistrate; I must go and ask him to help me. Come with me."

XXIII

As it was easy to see, as M. Verduret had prophesied, the effect of Prosper's anonymous letter was most lamentable.

It was in the morning; M. André Fauvel had gone into his private office to open his daily mail. He had already broken the seals of a dozen or more envelopes, and had run his eye over that number of communications of various sorts, when the fatal mis-sive came under his hand. The handwriting attracted his attention. It was evidently disguised, and although, because he was a millionaire, he was accustomed to receive a goodly number of anonymous requests or insults, this particular one impressed him; nay, more, — it would be absurd to deny the reality of presentiments, — caused a feeling of oppression at his heart. It was with a trembling hand, with an absolute certainty that he was about to learn of something disastrous, that he broke the seal, unfolded the coarse restaurant paper and read: —

“DEAR MONSIEUR, — You turned your cashier over to the courts, and you did well, for you were certain that he was unfaithful.

“But if it was he who stole 350,000 francs from your safe, was it he also who stole Madame Fauvel's diamonds?” etc., etc.

It was like a stroke of lightning to this man, whose unbroken prosperity had exhausted the favors of destiny, and who, had he searched his whole past, would not have found therein a single tear shed for a real misfortune.

What! his wife was false to him; she had chosen among all the men on earth one who was so despicably base as to obtain possession of her jewels, and who had abused his power over her to compel her to become an accomplice in a robbery which caused the ruin of an innocent man! For that was the real meaning of the contents of the anonymous letter.

M. Fauvel was crushed at first, like an unfortunate wight who receives a blow on his skull when he has the least reason to expect it. All his ideas were thrown into confusion and whirled about in space, at random, as the leaves in autumn whirl about in the first gusts of the tempest. It seemed to him that all was dark around him, and that a deathly numbness paralyzed his mind.

But in a few moments reason returned to him.

"What a dastardly outrage!" he cried; "what a shameful abomination!"

And he crumpled the infernal letter fiercely in his hand and threw it on the hearth, where there was no fire at the moment, muttering:—

"I will not think of it again. I will not smirch my imagination with such villanous slanders."

He said this; nay more, when he said it he thought it, and yet he could not make up his mind to continue going through his mail. For suspicion, like those imperceptible worms that make their way into ripe fruit, leaving no trace on the surface, and spoil it inside,—suspicion, when it has made its way into the brain, takes root and settles there, and leaves no belief intact.

With his elbows on his desk and his face in his hands, M. Fauvel reflected, making fruitless efforts to recover his calmness, the lucidity of his mind.

"But suppose the letter tells the truth!"

A paroxysm of wrath succeeded the prostration of the first moments, — the dangerous, contained wrath that deprives one of his freedom of will, drives him out of his senses, and impels him to commit crime.

"Ah!" he said, his teeth clenched with rage, "if I knew the villain who dared to write to me! if I had my hands on him!"

Thereupon, thinking that the handwriting might give him some information, he rose and took the fatal paper from the ashes. He opened it, smoothed it as best he could, placed it on his desk, and set about studying the letters, concentrating all the powers of his intellect upon an upward or a downward stroke, or the shape of a capital letter.

"This must be the work of some one of my clerks whose salary I have reduced or whose self-esteem I have wounded," he thought.

And he passed in review his numerous establishment, without hitting upon anybody who would be capable of such a despicable revenge.

Thereupon he wondered where the letter had been posted, thinking that that detail might throw some light on the mystery. He looked for the envelope, found it, and read: —

"Rue du Cardinal-Lemoine."

That gave him no information, and he turned once more to the letter, spelling out all the words, so to speak, one after another, weighing each phrase, analyzing the composition of every sentence.

It is universally agreed that an anonymous letter, which is always the work of a coward, should be treated with absolute contempt and disregarded. And yet how many catastrophes have no other origin! How many noble lives have been wrecked, ruined by a few lines which some wretch, heedless of conse-

quences, has scrawled on a scrap of paper! Oh! yes, we scorn the anonymous letter, we toss it in the fire, and it burns. But after the flame has destroyed the paper, the doubt remains and, like a subtle poison, is volatilized and penetrates the inmost recesses of the mind, corrupting and deranging the most sacred and firmest beliefs. And some trace of it always remains. The wife who is suspected, albeit unjustly and only for an hour, is no longer the wife in whom you had the same confidence as in yourself. Whatever happens, doubt leaves its mark, like the mark of a perspiring finger, on the gilding of the idol.

As M. Fauvel reflected, his confidence, so absolute a few moments before, wavered more and more.

"No! I can endure this torture no longer," he cried. "I will go and show this letter to my wife."

He started to rise, but a ghastly thought, more painful than a red-hot needle thrust into the flesh, nailed him to his chair.

"Suppose that it is true!" he muttered; "that I have been basely deceived! By confiding in my wife, I put her on her guard, I deprive myself of all means of investigation, I abandon forever all hope of ascertaining the truth."

Thus all the presumptions of M. Verduret, that eminent analyst of passion, were verified.

"If," he had said, "M. Fauvel does not yield to the impulse of the first moment, if he reflects, we have some time before us."

In fact, after long and painful meditation, the banker made up his mind that he would watch his wife. Yes, he, the most loyal and candid of men, resigned himself to play the ignominious rôle of the jealous husband, the domestic spy, whose pitiable in-

vestigations are as degrading, aye, more degrading to him than to her who is the object of them. He, the creature of impulse, of sudden outbursts of anger soon appeased, had deliberately resolved to assume an impassive countenance, to collect one by one proofs of innocence or guilt, to impose silence on his wrath, and not to break out until he should have the evidence to support him.

He had, by the way, a very simple method of verifying the insinuations of the letter. His wife's diamonds had been taken, so he was informed, to the Mont-de-Piété. It was easy for him to assure himself of the truth of that statement. If the letter lied on that point, no reliance was to be placed on the rest of it. If, on the contrary, it told the truth! —

M. André Fauvel had reached that point in his meditations, when he was informed that breakfast was served. It was most important that his thoughts should not be divined. Before leaving his office he looked in the mirror; he was so horribly pale that he was alarmed.

"Can it be that I lack courage?" he said.

At the table he strove to master his emotion sufficiently to avoid the questions with which his wife's solicitude always led her to overwhelm him at the slightest symptom of illness. He went so far as to talk freely and tell stories, hoping thus to divert attention from himself. But, as he talked, he thought of nothing but the means of inspecting his wife's bureau drawers, without her knowledge, at the earliest possible moment. This thought engrossed him so completely that he could not refrain from asking her if she were going out that day.

"Yes," she replied; "it is horrible weather, but Madeleine and I have several errands to do,"

"At what time do you expect to go?"

"Immediately after breakfast."

He breathed hard, as if he had been relieved of a terrible oppression. In a few moments he would know what to believe. So painful, so intolerable was the unfortunate man's uncertainty that he preferred anything else, even the most ghastly reality.

When breakfast was at an end he lighted a cigar, but he did not stay in the dining-room as he was accustomed to do, but went to his private office, pretending that he had some urgent business to attend to. He carried precaution so far as to call his son Lucien and give him an errand to do. He wished to be left alone in the house. At last, after half an hour, which seemed to him a century, he heard a carriage rumbling under the arched gateway. Madame Fauvel and her niece had gone.

He waited no longer, but rushed into his wife's bedroom and opened the drawer in which she kept her jewels. Many of the cases which he knew that she possessed were missing; those that remained — there were ten or twelve of them — were empty. The anonymous letter told the truth.

This certainty burst like a bomb-shell in M. Fauvel's brain. And yet —

"No," he stammered, "no, it is not possible!"

Thereupon, with the frantic desperation of agony, as if he were condemned to death and cherished a hope of finding his pardon, he began to search everywhere, to look through all the drawers in all the furniture, but with due precaution, taking the greatest care to leave no traces of his search. He realized vaguely that Madame Fauvel might have changed the place in which she kept her jewels, have sent some of them to be repaired or remounted.

But he found nothing!

Then he remembered the great ball given by MM. Jandidier. He, in his vanity, had said to his wife: —

“Why don't you wear your diamonds?”

And she had replied with a smile: —

“What for? everybody knows them, and so, if I don't wear them, I shall attract all the more attention; besides, they would not be appropriate for my costume.”

Yes, she had said that without confusion, without blushing, without a quaver in her voice. What impudence! what a depth of corruption was hidden beneath that virgin-like exterior which she retained after twenty years of marriage!

But suddenly, in the general overturn of his thoughts, a ray of hope came to him, feeble, hardly acceptable, but to which he clung like a drowning man to his plank — Madame Fauvel might have put her diamonds in Madeleine's room.

Without pausing to reflect upon the odiousness of his conduct, he hurried to the girl's bedroom, and there, as in his wife's room, laid his brutal hands upon everything, oblivious of the respect he owed to that sanctuary. He did not find Madame Fauvel's diamonds; but he discovered seven or eight empty cases in Madeleine's jewel-chest.

So she, too, had given away her jewels; she knew of the family shame; she was an accomplice.

This last blow shattered M. Fauvel's courage.

“They plotted together to deceive me,” he muttered; “they plotted together!”

And he sank into a chair, crushed, prostrated. Great tears rolled silently down his cheeks, and at intervals his breast rose in a profound sigh.

His life was ended. In an instant the edifice of

his happiness, his tranquillity, his future, which he had spent twenty years in building, which he believed to be strong enough to withstand all the caprices of destiny, crumbled and fell, more fragile than glass. Externally, nothing was changed in his life; his material welfare was not impaired; the objects about him remained the same and looked the same, and yet an upheaval had taken place, more incredible, more surprising than if day and night should change places.

What! Valentine, the chaste maiden whom he had loved so dearly, whose hand he had purchased at the price of his fortune; Valentine, the wife, who had become more and more dear to him as they grew old together; Valentine, to all appearance a wife beyond compare, was false to him! She deceived him — she — the mother of his sons!

This last thought above all stirred his whole being to revolt. His sons! What bitter mockery! Were they really his? If she deceived him now, when her hair was beginning to turn white about her temples, had she not deceived him heretofore? Thus was he tortured not only in the present, but in the past as well, redeeming with a few moments of indescribable anguish his years of happiness, maddened to frenzy by the memory of his domestic bliss, like a man who should suddenly learn that the exquisite wines which had made him drunk were poisoned.

For so it is; confidence knows no compromises or gradations; it exists or does not exist. And his confidence had vanished. All the unhappy man's dreams, all his hopes were based upon that woman's love. Discovering, as he believed, that she was unworthy of him, he could imagine no possibility of happiness, and he asked himself of what use it

was for him to live any longer, what object he could have in life.

However, M. Fauvel's prostration was of brief duration. The fire of wrath soon dried his tears, and he rose thirsting for revenge, determined to extort a high price for his ruined happiness. But he realized that he could not give way to the impulses of his resentment on the strength of the single fact that the diamonds could not be found. Luckily, he could easily procure other evidence.

To begin with, he summoned his valet, and ordered him to hand to him, his master, all the letters that were delivered at the house. Then he sent to his correspondent at Saint-Remy, a notary, a long telegraphic despatch, in which he requested exact information concerning the Lagors family, and Raoul in particular. And lastly, following the advice of the anonymous denunciation, he visited the Prefecture of Police, hoping to find there a biography of Clameran.

But the police, luckily for many people, are as discreet as the grave itself. They keep their secrets to themselves, as a miser keeps his hoard. An order from the prosecuting attorney's office is necessary to make the terrible green boxes speak which are kept in a special gallery padlocked like a strong-box.

M. Fauvel was asked very courteously what motives led him to inquire into the past life of a citizen of France; and as he could not divulge them, he was advised to apply to the *procureur impérial*. This suggestion he was unable to accept. He had resolved that the secret of his misfortunes should be restricted to the three persons involved. Being mortally insulted, he chose to be the sole judge and the executioner.

He returned home more exasperated than when he went out, and he found a despatch from Saint-Remy in answer to his own: —

"The Lagors family," he was told, as M. Verduret had been told, "is in the depths of destitution, and no one here knows Monsieur Raoul. Madame de Lagors had only daughters by her marriage," etc., etc.

This revelation was the last drop of water, which caused the cup to overflow. The banker believed that he was able at last to measure the depths of his wife's degradation. He discovered in her a refinement of duplicity more shocking perhaps than her crime itself.

"The miserable creature!" he cried, insane with grief and anger, "the miserable creature! In order to see her lover more freely, in order to have him always before her eyes, she dared to introduce him to me under the name of a nephew who never existed. She had the inconceivable effrontery to open my house to him, to seat him at my fireside with our sons and myself. And I, honest idiot that I am, a trustful and credulous husband, loved the fellow, shook his hand, loaned him my money."

Then he imagined Raoul and his wife, at their assignations, making merry over his innocent complaisance, and, as the stings of wounded self-esteem were added to the horrible rending of all his feelings, he suffered the most fearful agony known to mankind.

Death! Nothing but death seemed to him a fitting punishment for such outrages. But the very intensity of his wrath gave him strength to feign, to restrain himself.

"It is my turn to deceive the wretches," he said to himself with ghastly satisfaction.

He appeared that evening as he always appeared. He made jokes at dinner. But when Clameran entered the salon about nine o'clock, he fled, fearing that he might not be able to contain himself, and he did not return home until very late.

The next day he reaped the fruit of his prudence. Among the letters which his valet brought to him at noon was one which bore the Vésinet postmark. With infinite precautions he broke the seal and read:

DEAR AUNT, — It is absolutely necessary that I should see you to-day and I shall expect you.

I will tell you when I see you why I am prevented from going to your house.

RAOUL.

"I have them now!" cried M. Fauvel, shuddering with the joy of gratified vengeance.

He was so sure that he should soon have revenge within his grasp that he opened one of the drawers of his desk, took out a revolver, and tested the hammer.

He was certain that he was alone, but Nina Gypsy witnessed his every movement. Just returned from the Grand-Archange, she had her eye at the key-hole, watching, and the banker's gestures revealed the truth to her.

M. Fauvel laid his revolver on the mantel and devoted himself to readjusting the seal of the letter. When that operation was concluded, he went out to hand it to the concierge, as he did not wish his wife to know that Raoul's letter had passed through his hands. He was absent only two minutes; but Nina, inspired by the imminence of the danger, had time to enter the office, run to the fireplace, and remove the bullets from the revolver.

"In that way," she thought, "the danger from the first impulse is removed, and M. Verduret, to whom I will send word by Cavaillon of what is going on, will perhaps have time to interfere."

She ran downstairs to give her instructions to the young clerk, bidding him give his message to Madame Alexandre, in order to make success more certain.

An hour later Madame Fauvel, having dressed to go out, ordered her carriage and drove away.

M. Fauvel, who had already sent for a cab, followed her.

"Great Heaven!" thought Nina, "if M. Verduret doesn't arrive in time, Madame Fauvel and Raoul are lost!"

XXIV

ON the day when the Marquis de Clameran could see no other obstacle than Raoul de Lagors between himself and Madeleine, he had sworn that he would remove that obstacle. His measures were taken within twenty-four hours, and the next night, as Raoul was returning on foot to his house at Vésinet, after midnight, he was attacked at the corner of the road to the station by three men, who were fully determined, so they said, to see by his watch what time it was.

Despite his slender frame, Raoul was tremendously strong, active, accustomed to physical exercise, and expert in the English science of boxing; so he succeeded in ridding himself of his assailants without other damage than a severe scratch on his left arm.

Having come safely out of that affair, he promised himself that he would take due precautions, and that,

although he had hitherto refused to credit the stories of nocturnal hold-ups, he would always go armed at night.

It did not occur to him at that time to suspect his confederate. But, two days later, a tall, swaggering fellow, whom he did not know, picked a quarrel with him, for no apparent cause, at a café which he frequented, and ended by throwing his card in his face, informing him that he would hold himself at his disposal and was ready to afford him all imaginable satisfaction.

Raoul's impulse was to seize the insolent rascal and administer condign punishment, but his friends held him back.

"Very good!" he said; "be at home to-morrow morning, monsieur; I will send two of my friends to you."

He said this on the spur of the moment, trembling with rage; but when the insulter had gone he recovered his self-possession; he reflected upon what had passed, and the strangest doubts assailed his mind. He picked up the card left by the gentleman with long moustaches and bullying manner, and read thereon: —

"W. H. B. JACOBSON,

Ex-volunteer in Garibaldi's army,
Ex-captain in the armies of the South.
(Italy-America.)

30 Rue Léonie."

"Oho!" he thought, "here's a swaggering man of war who probably earned all his steps in a fencing-school!"

Raoul had seen a good deal of life, and had retained just enough to know what to think of those

honorable heroes who exhibit their records of service on their visiting-cards. But, as the insult had had numerous witnesses, that knowledge did not prevent his requesting two young men of his acquaintance to call upon M. Jacobson early the next morning and arrange with him the conditions of a meeting. It was agreed that these gentlemen should make a report of their mission to Raoul, not at his house at Vésinet, but at the Hôtel du Louvre, where he proposed to sleep. Everything being thus arranged, Raoul went out. Scenting a trap, he was determined to set his mind at rest.

Being active and experienced, he started at once in quest of information. The information which he obtained, not without difficulty, was neither heroic nor reassuring. M. Jacobson, who lodged in a house of wretched aspect, occupied mainly by ladies of more than easy morals, was described to him as an eccentric gentleman whose means of existence seemed to be a problem very difficult of solution. He reigned despotically, so he was told, at a neighboring *table d'hôte*, went out a great deal, returned late, and seemed to have little other capital than his military record, his social talents, and a notable quantity of expedients of all varieties.

"This being the state of the case," pondered Raoul, "what is this person's object in picking a quarrel with me? What advantage will he derive from running me through? Apparently none at all,—to say nothing of the fact that his bellicose humor may arouse the troublesome susceptibilities of the police, which he must be extremely anxious to avoid. Therefore he must have reasons which I do not detect for acting as he does; therefore —"

This little investigation, skilfully and thoroughly

conducted, these various considerations and the natural deductions therefrom cooled Raoul's blood so completely that, when he returned to the Hôtel du Louvre, he did not mention his adventure to Clameran, who had not retired.

About half after eight his seconds arrived. M. Jacobson consented to fight with swords in the forest of Vincennes, but he insisted on fighting at once. Raoul was far from being reassured, but his manner was very unconcerned as he replied:—

"Very good! I accept the gentleman's terms; let us go."

They drove to the place appointed, and after a brief engagement Raoul was wounded slightly just above the right breast. The ex-captain of the armies of the South insisted upon continuing the duel to the death, and his seconds took the same view; but Raoul's seconds—honest fellows both—declared that honor was satisfied, and that they would not allow their principal to risk his life again.

The others had no choice but to comply, for Raoul's seconds threatened to leave the ground; and Raoul returned home, deeming himself very fortunate to get off with a trifling blood-letting, and fully resolved to avoid thenceforth the soi-disant Garibaldian.

The fact was that his alert mind had travelled far since the preceding day, assisted by the salutary counsel of the night. Between the felonious assault at Vésinet and this evidently premeditated and wilful duel, forced upon him for no plausible reason, he detected a coincidence that was singular, to say the least. From that point it was but a step to the discovery of Clameran's arm behind the apparent perpetrators of these two attacks; his mind took that step.

Having learned from Madame Fauvel the conditions which Madeleine insisted upon as the price of her hand, he realized what a tremendous interest Clameran had in getting rid of him without becoming involved in difficulties with the police. This suspicion having entered his mind, he recalled a multitude of insignificant incidents of the past few days; he gave a meaning to certain apparently meaningless remarks, he questioned the marquis very adroitly, and his doubts soon changed to certainty.

This conviction, that the man whose schemes he had so powerfully assisted was paying assassins and arming swashbucklers against him, was well calculated to drive him wild with rage. Such treachery seemed monstrous to him. Being still an ingenuous scoundrel, he believed in honor among thieves, in the famous probity of criminals, who are, as some people delight to maintain, more faithful to their plighted word than honest men.

A very natural feeling of alarm was mingled with his wrath. He realized that when his life was threatened by so bold a villain as Clameran it hung only by a thread. Twice chance had miraculously favored him; a third attempt might be, was almost certain to be, fatal to him.

Judging his accomplice accurately, Raoul saw nothing but ambushes all about him; he saw death confronting him in every form. He was equally afraid to go out and to remain at home; he ventured into public places only with innumerable precautions, and he dreaded poison no less than cold steel. Indeed, he hardly dared to eat; he detected strange flavors, a sort of after-taste of strychnine, in all the dishes that were put before him.

To live so was impossible, and the necessity of de-

fending himself, no less than a desire for vengeance, caused his decision to assume the offensive. When he and Clameran were once fairly engaged on that ground, he fully realized that one or the other of them must inevitably succumb.

"It is much better," he said to himself, "to kill the devil than to be killed by him."

In his days of poverty, when he recklessly took the chances of Botany Bay for a few guineas, Raoul would not have hesitated to kill the devil himself. He would have had satisfaction of Clameran with a well-aimed knife-thrust. But with money, prudence had come to him. He wished to enjoy honestly the 400,000 francs he had stolen, and was determined not to compromise his newly-acquired consideration. So he began in his turn to look about for some quiet means of putting his redoubtable confederate out of the way. Such a means was hard to find. Meanwhile it seemed to him a ruse fair in war to give warning of Clameran's projects and to prevent his marriage. He was sure in that way of striking him fair in the heart, and that in itself was a satisfaction.

It was entirely in Raoul's power to prevent the marriage. Moreover, he was persuaded that by espousing openly his aunt's cause and Madeleine's, he could rescue them from Clameran's grasp. And the result of this long pondered resolution was his letter to Madame Fauvel asking her for an interview.

The poor woman did not hesitate. She hurried to Vésinet, trembling lest she should have to undergo fresh demands and threats. But she was mistaken. She found once more the Raoul of the first days, that fascinating, loving son, whose kisses had won her heart. Before opening his plans to her, before

explaining the truth to her in his own way, he desired to reassure her, you see.

He succeeded. The unfortunate woman's face wore a happy smile as she sat in an arm-chair with Raoul on his knees at her feet.

"I have made you suffer too horribly, mother," he whispered in his most cajoling tones. "I am sorry; listen to me —"

He had no time to say more; as he heard the door open, he sprang suddenly to his feet. M. Fauvel stood in the doorway, revolver in hand.

The banker was deathly pale. He was making, it was easy to see, superhuman efforts to display the cold impassiveness of the judge who sees the crime only, and punishes; but his calmness was as alarming as that which precedes and presages the fury of the storm.

To the cry which his wife and Raoul could not restrain when they saw him, he replied with the nervous, sneering laugh of the poor wretch whose reason is on the point of deserting him.

"Ah! you didn't expect me," he said; "you thought that my foolish confidence would afford you impunity forever!"

Raoul had had the courage to place himself in front of Madame Fauvel, sheltering her with his body, expecting a bullet, we must do him the justice to say, and preparing to receive it.

"Believe me, uncle —" he faltered.

A threatening gesture from the banker interrupted him.

"Enough," he said, "enough of such falsehoods and abominations as that! Let us have no more of a sickening comedy by which I am no longer deceived —"

"I swear —"

"Spare yourself the trouble of denying. Don't you see that I know everything? — understand me, absolutely everything! I know that my wife's diamonds have been pawned at the Mont-de-Piété, and by whom! I know who committed the robbery for which Prosper, an innocent man, was arrested and imprisoned!"

Madame Fauvel, utterly dismayed, had fallen upon her knees. The day she had so dreaded had come at last! In vain had she heaped falsehoods upon falsehoods for years past; in vain had she sacrificed herself and her loved ones; everything on earth is discovered sooner or later. Yes, whatever one may do, a moment always arrives when the truth frees itself from the veils beneath which one has thought to hide it, and shines forth more resplendent, like the sun after it has scattered the mist.

She saw that she was lost, and with imploring gestures, her face streaming with tears, she stammered: —

"Mercy! I implore you, André, forgive me!"

At the sound of that feeble voice the banker started and was stirred to the inmost depths of his being. That voice recalled all the hours of happiness in the past twenty years that he had owed to that woman, who had been the sovereign mistress of his will, and who could make him happy or wretched with a glance. His whole past awoke at her entreaties. In the miserable creature grovelling at his feet, he recognized his beloved Valentine, whom he had seen as in a dream beneath the poetic shades of La Verberie. In her he saw again the loving, devoted spouse of the early years, who had been at death's door when Lucien was born. And at the

memory of those former joys, never to be renewed, his heart swelled with sadness, emotion overcame him — words of pardon rose to his lips.

"Unhappy woman!" he muttered, "unhappy woman! what in Heaven's name have I done to you? Ah! I loved you too well, no doubt, and I showed it too plainly. One grows weary of everything, even of happiness. The pure joys of the domestic circle seemed insipid to you, did they not? Bored by the respect with which you were treated, and which you deserved, you preferred to risk your honor, our honor, and to defy the contempt of the world. Into what an abyss you have fallen, O Valentine! And how could you help being restrained by the thought of our children, even if my affection did at last become annoying to you?"

M. Fauvel spoke slowly, with a most painful effort, as if he were on the point of suffocating at every word.

Raoul, meanwhile, listened with the closest attention, and saw that, although the banker really knew a great deal, he did not know all. He realized that he had been misled by erroneous information, and that he was at that moment the victim of deceptive appearances. He believed that the misunderstanding which he suspected might be explained.

"Monsieur," he began, "I beg you —"

But the sound of his voice sufficed to break the charm. The banker's wrath awoke anew, more terrible, more threatening than before.

"Be silent!" he cried with an oath; "be silent!"

There was a long silence, broken only by Madame Fauvel's sobs.

"I came," continued the banker, "with the definite purpose of surprising you together and killing you

both. I have surprised you, but I lack courage, yes, courage; I cannot kill an unarmed man."

Raoul attempted to protest.

"Let me speak!" continued M. Fauvel. "Your life is in my hands, is it not? The law pardons the outraged husband's passion. Very good! I do not choose to avail myself of the pardon granted by the Code. I see on your mantel a revolver similar to mine; take it, and defend yourself."

"Never!"

"Defend yourself!" pursued the banker, raising his weapon; "defend yourself, or —"

Raoul saw the barrel of M. Fauvel's revolver within a foot of his breast; he was afraid, and took his weapon from the mantel.

"Stand in one corner of the room," said the banker, "and I will stand in the other; when your clock strikes, as it will very soon, we will fire together."

They took their places as M. Fauvel commanded, slowly, without a word. But the scene was too horrible for Madame Fauvel to endure. She realized but one thing, that her husband and son were about to murder each other before her eyes. Alarm and horror gave her strength to rise, and she stood between the two men, her arms extended, as if she hoped to stop the bullets. She was facing her husband.

"In pity's name, André," she groaned, "do not kill him! let me tell you the whole story."

This outburst of maternal love M. Fauvel mistook for the cry of the adulterous woman defending her lover. With incredible brutality, he seized her arm and threw her aside, crying: —

"Back!"

But she returned to the charge, and, rushing to Raoul, threw her arms about him.

"I am the one you should kill, I alone, for I alone am guilty."

At those words, a wave of blood rushed to M. Fauvel's brain; he took aim at the odious group, and fired. Neither Raoul nor Madame Fauvel fell; the banker fired a second time, then a third.

He was cocking his revolver for the fourth time, when a man appeared in the middle of the room, snatched the weapon from the banker's hands, threw him upon a couch and rushed up to Madame Fauvel. This man was M. Verduret, whom Cavaillon had found and warned, but who did not know that Nina had removed the bullets from M. Fauvel's revolver.

"Thank Heaven!" he cried, "she is not touched!"

But the banker had already risen.

"Let me alone," he said, struggling to free himself; "I will have my revenge!"

M. Verduret had grasped his wrists, which he squeezed as if he would break them, and putting his face near to the banker's, as if to give greater weight to his words, he said:—

"Thank God for having saved you from a horrible crime! The anonymous letter led you astray."

Extraordinary situations have this peculiarity, that the abnormal events which result from them seem natural to the actors who take part in them and whose passions have already shattered the fetters of social conventions. M. Fauvel did not think of asking this new arrival who he was nor where he acquired his information. He heard and remembered but one thing: the anonymous letter lied.

"My wife admits that she is guilty!" he muttered.

"Yes, and so she is," M. Verduret replied, "but not in the way you suppose. Do you know who this man is whom you proposed to kill?"

"Her lover!"

"No — but her son!"

The presence of this exceedingly well-informed individual seemed to confound Raoul, and to terrify him even more than M. Fauvel's threats. However, he had sufficient presence of mind to say: —

"It is true!"

The banker seemed to be on the verge of madness, and his haggard eyes wandered from M. Verduret to Raoul, then to his wife, who was more inanimate than the criminal awaiting sentence of death.

Suddenly the thought that they were making sport of him flashed through his brain.

"What you say is impossible!" he cried; "give me your proofs!"

"You shall have proofs," rejoined M. Verduret; "and, first of all, listen to what I have to say."

Thereupon, with his marvellous faculty of narration, he sketched rapidly, and in broad outline, the drama he had discovered.

Unquestionably, the truth was horrible enough in M. Fauvel's eyes; but what was it in comparison with what he had suspected? From the intense pain that he had felt, he realized that he still loved his wife. Could he not forgive a sin committed long before, redeemed by a life of devotion, and nobly expiated?

M. Verduret's narrative had been finished for some minutes, and still the banker said nothing. The multitude of events which had rushed upon him within forty-eight hours, as irresistible as an avalanche, and the horrible scene which had just taken place, bewildered M. Fauvel and deprived him of all power of reflection. His will, tossed hither and thither like a cork on the surface of the sea, was floating aimlessly about at the bidding of events. While his heart ad-

vised pardon and oblivion, his wounded self-esteem bade him remember in order to be revenged.

Except for Raoul, that wretch who stood before him, a living witness of her long-past sin, he would not have hesitated. Gaston de Clameran was dead, and he would have opened his arms to his wife, saying: —

“Come, your sacrifices to my honor shall be your absolution; come, and let us think of the past only as a bad dream which vanishes with the daylight.”

But Raoul deterred him.

“And he is your son,” he said to his wife; “this fellow who has stripped you bare and robbed me!”

Madame Fauvel was far too agitated to be able to utter a syllable. Luckily, M. Verduret was at hand.

“Oh!” he interposed, “madame will tell you that this young man is really Gaston de Clameran’s son; she believes it, she is sure of it — but —”

“Well!”

“To pillage her the more easily, they deceived her shamefully!”

For a minute or two Raoul had been stealthily manœuvring to approach the door. Imagining that nobody was thinking of him at the moment, he proposed to make his escape. But M. Verduret, who had anticipated such a step on his part, was watching him out of the corner of his eye, and caught him just as he was disappearing.

“Where are we going so fast, my fine fellow?” he said, leading him back to the middle of the room. “So we wanted to part company with our friends, did we? That is not polite. Before we separate, deuce take it! we must have a little explanation!”

M. Verduret’s bantering air and his mocking tone

were like gleams of light to Raoul. He recoiled in dismay, muttering :—

“The clown!”

“Exactly!” rejoined the stout man; “exactly! Ah! you recognize me, do you? In that case, I confess. Yes, I am the jovial clown of MM. Jandier’s ball. Do you doubt it?”

He pulled up his coat-sleeve, bared his arm, and continued :—

“If you are not fully convinced, examine this fresh scar. Perhaps you may know the bungling rascal who stumbled against me with an open knife in his hand, one fine night as I was walking along Rue Bourdaloue? Ah! you don’t deny it? That’s so much gained. In that case you will be obliging enough to tell us your little story.”

But Raoul was in the grip of one of those frights which contract the throat and make it impossible to utter a word.

“You say nothing!” continued M. Verduret; “can it be that you are modest? Bravo! modesty goes well with talent, and you are really a very talented rascal for your age.”

M. Fauvel listened, but did not understand.

“Into what abyss of shame have we fallen!” he groaned.

“Have no fear, monsieur,” rejoined M. Verduret, resuming his serious demeanor; “after what I have been forced to tell you, what remains is nothing at all. This is the complement of the story: On leaving Mihonne, after she had told him of the — misfortunes of Mademoiselle Valentine de la Verberie, Clameran lost no time in betaking himself to London. Being accurately informed, he soon found the worthy woman to whom the countess had intrusted Gaston’s

son. But there disappointment awaited him. He was told that the child, who was entered on the parish records under the name of Raoul-Valentin Wilson, died of croup at the age of eighteen months."

Raoul attempted to protest.

"They pretend to say that?" he began.

"Yes, my fine fellow, they pretend to say it and they have put it in writing. Do you suppose I am the man to be satisfied with empty words?"

He took from his pocket divers papers decorated with official seals and placed them on the table.

"Here," he continued, "are the affidavits of the farmer's wife, her husband, and four witnesses; also an extract from the register of births; also a death certificate in proper form, and all duly attested by the French embassy. Are you satisfied, my boy? Does this evidence satisfy you?"

"But then —" queried the banker.

"Then," rejoined M. Verduret, "Clameran fancied that he would not need a child to extort money from Madame Fauvel; but he was mistaken. His first attempt was a failure. What was he to do? The rascal has an inventive genius. Among all the brigands of his acquaintance — and he knows a lot of them! — he selected the one whom you see before you."

Madame Fauvel was in a truly pitiable state, and yet hope was born again in her heart. Her anxiety had been so indescribably painful, for so long a time, that she had a ghastly sense of relief in learning the truth at last.

"Is it possible?" she muttered. "Is it possible?"

"Can it be that such infernal schemes are plotted and carried out in these days?" exclaimed the banker.

"It is all false!" declared Raoul, boldly.

"Does monsieur desire proofs?" said M. Verduret, with an ironical reverence, addressed to Raoul alone. "Monsieur shall have them. I have just this moment left one of my friends, M. Pâlot, who has just returned from London, and who has obtained a famous stock of information. Tell me what you think of this little story, which he just told me.

"About 1847, Lord Murray, who is a great nobleman and very generous, had a jockey named Spencer, to whom he was particularly attached. At the Epsom races this clever jockey had a bad fall and was killed. Lord Murray was in great distress; and as he had no children he declared that he proposed to take charge of Spencer's son, then a child of four. He kept his word. James Spencer was brought up as the heir to a great name. He was a beautiful boy, happily endowed with a seductive exterior, with a keen and active intellect. Until he was sixteen years old James afforded his patron all imaginable satisfaction. Unfortunately he made some evil acquaintances at that age and went to the bad. Lord Murray, who was indulgence itself, forgave many misdeeds, but one fine day, having learned that his adopted son was amusing himself by imitating his signature on notes of hand, he lost patience and turned him out of doors. Now, James Spencer had been in London four years, living by cards and divers other industries, when he fell in with Clameran, who offered him 25,000 francs to play a rôle in a comedy of his devising."

Raoul did not need to hear any more.

"You are a detective?" he asked.

The stout man smiled affably.

"At this moment," he said, "I am simply a friend

of Prosper Bertomy. Whether I am one thing or the other depends upon how you behave."

"What do you require of me?"

"Where are the 350,000 francs you stole?"

The young rascal hesitated a moment.

"They are here," he replied at last.

"Good! this frankness will count in your favor. The 350,000 francs are really here; I know it, and I also know that they are hidden in the lower part of the cupboard yonder. Will you give them up?"

Raoul realized that his game was lost; he hurried to the cupboard and took from it several packages of bank-notes and an enormous bundle of Mont-de-Piété pawn-tickets.

"Very good!" said M. Verduret, taking a mental inventory of all that Raoul handed him; "very good! that is what I call behaving with good judgment."

Raoul had counted upon that moment, when the attention of the others was diverted from him. He stole softly to the door, holding his breath, and disappeared, locking the door behind him, for the key was on the outside.

"He has gone!" cried M. Fauvel.

"Naturally," rejoined M. Verduret, not deigning to turn his head; "I thought he would have wit enough for that."

"But—"

"What! do you want all this to be noised abroad? Are you anxious to describe in the police court the rascality of which your wife has been the victim?"

"Oh! monsieur!"

"Then let that miserable rascal go. Here are the 350,000 francs; the full amount is here. Here are the tickets for all the articles he has pledged. Let us be content. He has with him about 50,000 francs;

all the better. That sum will enable him to go abroad, and we shall hear no more of him."

Like everybody else, M. Fauvel submitted to M. Verduret's ascendancy. He had returned by slow degrees to a realization of his surroundings; un-hoped-for prospects opened out before him, he understood that this man had saved something more precious than his life. The expression of his gratitude was not long delayed. He seized M. Verduret's hands almost as if he proposed to carry them to his lips, and said in a voice that trembled with emotion:

"How can I ever prove to you the depth of my gratitude, monsieur? How can I repay the immense service you have rendered me?"

M. Verduret reflected.

"If that is your feeling," he began, "I have a favor to ask of you —"

"A favor, you! to ask of me! Speak, monsieur, speak! Can you not understand that my person as well as my fortune are at your service?"

"Then, monsieur, I will confess that I am Prosper's friend. Will you not help him to rehabilitate himself? You can do so much for him, monsieur! He loves Mademoiselle Madeleine —"

"Madeleine shall be his wife, monsieur," M. Fauvel interrupted him; "I swear it. Yes, I will rehabilitate him, and so publicly that no one will ever dare to reproach him because of my fatal mistake."

The stout man had taken his hat and cane from a corner, just as if he had been making an ordinary social call.

"You will pardon me for disturbing you," he said, "but Madame Fauvel —"

"André!" murmured the poor woman, "André!"

The banker hesitated a second or two, then, boldly making up his mind, he ran to his wife and threw his arms about her, saying: —

“No, I will not be foolish enough to struggle against my heart! I do not forgive, Valentine, I forget, I forget everything.”

M. Verduret had no further business at Vésinet. That was why he slipped away without taking leave of the banker, hurried to the cab which had brought him, and ordered the cabman to drive him to Paris, to the Hôtel du Louvre — and to drive fast. At that moment he was consumed by anxiety. So far as Raoul was concerned, everything was arranged, the young rascal was probably far away. But was it possible for Clameran to escape the punishment he deserved? Clearly not.

Now, M. Verduret was wondering how he was to turn Clameran over to the authorities without compromising Madame Fauvel; and he ran through his repertory of expedients to no purpose; he could find none adapted to the present emergency.

“There is but one way,” he thought. “A charge of poisoning must be lodged at Oloron. I can go there and work up ‘public opinion;’ there will be a great outcry and an inquiry. Yes, but that requires time, and Clameran is too thoroughly warned not to run for it.”

He was groaning inwardly over his helplessness when the cab stopped in front of the Hôtel du Louvre. It was almost dark. Under the porch of the hotel and under the arcades there was a crowd of at least a hundred persons, and despite the “Move on! move on!” of the police officers, they held their ground, talking earnestly, as if of some serious event.

"What has happened?" M. Verduret asked one of the most talkative.

"A most extraordinary thing, monsieur," replied the other, a sort of Prudhomme, "an odd, yes, a very strange thing, such as is seen nowhere but in the capital; for I saw him, I saw him perfectly; he appeared first at the seventh round window up there; he was half naked! They tried to catch him, but deuce take it! with the agility of a monkey or a sleepwalker he jumped out on the roof, shouting murder. The extreme audacity of that performance led me to suppose —"

The fellow stopped short, exceedingly vexed; his companion had left him.

"If only it might be he!" thought M. Verduret; "if it should prove that fright had deranged that brain, which was so marvellously well equipped for crime!"

As he soliloquized he made good use of his elbows and succeeded in making his way into the courtyard of the hotel. M. Fanferlot stood at the foot of the main stairway, with three men whose faces were remarkable by reason of their strange expression.

"Well!" exclaimed M. Verduret.

With praiseworthy unanimity the four men presented arms.

"The patron!" they said.

"Tell me what the trouble is," said the stout man, with an oath.

"The trouble is, patron," replied M. Fanferlot, with a gesture of despair, "that I have no luck at all. For once in my life I strike a genuine case, and paf! my criminal goes into bankruptcy."

"Then it is Clameran who — ?"

"What? why, yes, he's the man! When he spied

me this morning, the rascal was off like a hare, at such a pace, oh! at such a pace! — I thought he was good for Ivry, at the very least. Not at all. When he got to Boulevard des Écoles, a sudden thought seized him and he came here. In all probability he came to get his little pile. He comes in, and what does he see? My three comrades here present. That sight was like the blow of a hammer on his head. He saw that he was lost and his reason moved out."

"But where is he?"

"At the Prefecture, no doubt. I saw some policemen truss him up and pack him in a cab."

"Let us go there."

M. Verduret and Fanferlot found Clameran in one of the special cells reserved for dangerous guests. They had put him in a strait-jacket, and he was struggling fiercely with three attendants and a doctor, who were trying to make him swallow a draught.

"Help!" he cried, "help! Don't you see him? He's coming after me! it's my brother; he means to poison me!"

M. Verduret took the doctor aside to ask him his opinion.

"The poor devil is in a hopeless state," the doctor replied; "this particular variety of alienism is never cured. He thinks that some one wants to poison him; he will refuse to eat or drink, and, whatever we may do, he will starve to death at last, after undergoing all the tortures of poison."

As he left the Prefecture M. Verduret shuddered.

"Madame Fauvel is saved," he muttered, "now that God has taken it upon himself to punish Clameran."

"And after all," grumbled Fanferlot, "I have

nothing but my trouble and expense to show for it; what luck!"

"True," replied M. Verduret; "*File No. 113* will stay in the examining magistrate's office. But cheer up. Before the end of the month I will send you with a letter to a friend of mine, and what you lose in glory, you will make up in cash."

XXV

FOUR days later, in the morning, M. Lecoq — the official Lecoq who resembles a chief of bureau — was walking up and down his study, looking at the clock every moment. At last the bell rang, and the trusty Janouille admitted Madame Nina and Prosper Bertomy.

"Ah!" said M. Lecoq, "you are prompt, my lovers; that is well."

"We are not lovers, monsieur," replied Madame Gypsy, "and nothing less than M. Verduret's express commands would have induced us to meet again. He made an appointment with us here, at your house."

"Very good!" said the famous detective; "in that case, be good enough to wait here a few moments, and I will go and call him."

Nina and Prosper were left alone for more than a quarter of an hour, without exchanging a word. At last a door opened and M. Verduret appeared. Nina and Prosper would have run to meet him, but he nailed them to their places with one of those glances which no one can withstand.

"You have come," he began in a stern tone, "to learn the secret of my conduct. I have promised

and I will keep my promise, dearly as it costs me at this moment. So listen to me.

"My best friend is an honest, loyal fellow named Caldas. Eighteen months ago that friend of mine was the happiest of men. He was in love with a young woman; he lived only through her and for her, and, simpleton that he was, he imagined that she loved him above all things."

"She did," cried Gypsy; "yes, she did love him."

"Indeed! She loved him so dearly that one fine night she went off with another man. On the spur of the moment, Caldas, being mad with grief, determined to kill himself. But, on reflection, he said to himself that it was better to live and be revenged."

"But, then —" faltered Prosper.

"Then Caldas avenged himself in a . . . of his own. That is to say, before the eyes of the woman who was false to him he displayed his vast superiority to the other. That other, a weakling, a coward, devoid of intelligence, was falling into a deep hole; the powerful hand of Caldas saved him. For you understand, do you not? The woman is Nina; you are the seducer; as for Caldas —"

With a sudden movement he removed his wig and whiskers, and the proud and intelligent face of the real Lecoq appeared.

"Caldas!" cried Nina. .

"No, not Caldas, nor Verduret, but Lecoq, the detective." There was a moment of stupefaction; then M. Lecoq turned to Prosper.

"You do not owe your salvation to me alone," he said. "A woman who had the courage to trust to my guidance made the task an easy one for me. That woman is Mademoiselle Madeleine; she was

the one to whom I had given my word that M. Fauvel should know nothing. Your letter made my plans impracticable. I have done."

He started to return to his bedroom, but Nina barred the way.

"Caldas!" she said, "I implore you; I am a miserable creature! Ah! if you knew! Forgive me! pity me!"

Prosper left M. Lecoq's house alone.

On the fifteenth of last month, the marriage of M. Prosper Bertomy and Mademoiselle Madeleine Fauvel was celebrated at Notre-Dame-de-Lorette.

The banking-house is still located on Rue de Provence, but, as M. Fauvel contemplates retiring to the country, the firm name has been changed, and is now *Prosper Bertomy et Cie.*

THE END

New Fiction.



The Sword of Justice.

By SHEPPARD STEVENS. Author of "I am the King."
16mo. Cloth, extra. \$1.25.

This stirring romance deals with the events described by Parkman in the first portion of "Pioneers of France in the New World," beginning with the killing of the Huguenots at Fort Caroline, Florida, and ending with its avenging by Dominique de Gourgues. The author follows history with absolute accuracy, and has given a valuable and most interesting contribution to the list of romances dealing with the early history of the American Continent.

The Count's Snuff-Box,

A Romance of Washington and Buzzard's Bay during the War of 1812. By GEORGE R. R. RIVERS, author of "The Governor's Garden," "Captain Shays, a Populist of 1786," etc. Illustrated by Clyde O. De Land. 12mo. Cloth, gilt top. \$1.50.

A well-conceived and well-told story, from which the reader will get an excellent idea of society and manners in the nation's capital nearly a century ago. — *Boston Transcript*.

Invisible Links.

By SELMA LAGERLÖF. Author of "Gösta Berling," "The Miracles of Antichrist," etc. Translated from the Swedish by PAULINE BANCROFT FLACH. Crown 8vo. Cloth, extra, gilt top. \$1.50.

A new volume of remarkable stories by the young Swedish writer whose other works have been so favorably received both in America and in England. It includes the following: The Spirit of Fasting and Petter Nord; The Legend of the Bird's Nest; The King's Grave; The Outlaws; Reor's Saga; Valdemar Atterdag Levies a Contribution on Visby; Mamsell Fredrika; The Romance of a Fisherwife; Mother's Portrait; A Fallen King; A Christmas Guest; Uncle Reuben; Downy; Among the Climbing Roses.

File Number One Hundred and Thirteen.

By ÉMILE GABORIAU. Translated by GEORGE BURNHAM IVES. 12mo. Cloth, extra. \$1.50.

The first in a series of entirely new translations of the famous detective stories of Gaboriau, including especially those dealing with the experiences of Gaboriau's celebrated creation, "Monsieur Lecoq."

King or Knave, Which Wins?

An Old Tale of Huguenot Days. By WILLIAM HENRY JOHNSON, author of "The King's Henchman." With four illustrations by CLYDE O. DE LAND. 12mo. Cloth, extra. \$1.50.

This is a sequel to the author's successful romance of the time of Henry of Navarre, entitled "The King's Henchman." Much of its interest centres in the personality of the famous Gabrielle d'Estrées and the efforts of Henry of Navarre to obtain possession of the throne of France. The important characters of "The King's Henchman" are introduced.

Distinctly readable. If history could be taught in this fashion now it would become worth while. — *Time and the Hour*.

The Story of Gösta Berling.

Translated from the Swedish of SELMA LAGERLÖF, by PAULINE BANCROFT FLACH. 12mo. Cloth, gilt. \$1.75.

Of such marked power that unless Miss Lagerlöf is unable to sustain the force indicated by this example of her work, she will become one of the great novelists of the continent. — *Public Opinion*.

A veritable epic. — *London Telegraph*.

Each Life Unfulfilled.

By ANNA CHAPIN RAY, author of "Teddy, Her Book." etc. 16mo. Cloth, gilt. \$1.25.

Simply written and enjoyable. — *Boston Journal*.

Places her among the promising young novelists of the country. — *New York Times*.

Pastor Naudié's Young Wife.

By ÉDOUARD ROD. Translated from the French by BRADLEY GILMAN. 12mo. Decorated cloth. \$1.25.

The atmosphere of the old Huguenot stronghold of La Rochelle is admirably given, and the volume contains some masterly studies in character. — *New York Commercial Advertiser*.

From Kingdom to Colony.

By MARY DEVEREUX. With illustrations by Henry Sandham. 12mo. Decorated cloth. \$1.50.

A charming story of the quaint old town of Marblehead in the early days of the Revolution. Wilful Mistress Dorothy Devereux, the brave little heroine of the romance, is a delightfully inconsistent and fascinating character.

Saragossa.

A Story of Spanish Valor. By PÉREZ GALDÓS. Translated from the original by MINNA CAROLINE SMITH. 12mo. Cloth, extra. \$1.50.

Pérez Galdós, possibly known best in the United States as the author of "Doña Perfecta," is indeed the Walter Scott of Spain. His tale of the siege of the ancient Aragon city by the generals of Napoleon stirs the blood with admiration of the indomitable valor of the besieged.

When the other events of the Spanish war shall be lost in the obscurity of time, or only traced by disconnected fragments, the story of Saragossa, like some ancient triumphal pillar standing amidst ruins, will tell a tale of past glory; and already men point to Saragossa, calling her "Spain." — *Napier's Peninsular War*.

The Miracles of Antichrist.

By SELMA LAGERLOF, author of "The Story of Gösta Berling." Translated from the Swedish by PAULINE BANCROFT FLACH. 12mo. Cloth, extra. \$1.50.

Not only a remarkably strong story, but an evidence of exceptional versatility. — *New York Commercial Advertiser*.

One feels that it is, indeed, "an astonishing book," and of a type almost unique. — *Cincinnati Times-Star*.

In every way a masterpiece. — *London Daily Chronicle*.

One cannot read "The Miracles of Antichrist" without noting a startling originality. — *Public Opinion*.

The Duke's Servants.

A Romance. By SIDNEY HERBERT BURCHELL, author of "In the Days of King James." 12mo. Cloth, extra. \$1.50.

Thoroughly well written, humorous, and most readable. — *London World*.

The playhouse life of the day is rendered with due regard to such historical data as exist. . . . The book is well worth reading. — *The Athenæum*.

I am the King.

Being the Account of some Happenings in the life of Godfrey de Bersac, Crusader Knight. By SHEPPARD STEVENS. 16mo. Cloth, extra. \$1.25.

A fresh and invigorating piece of reading. — *Nashville American*. Characterized by those graceful touches which belong to true and pure romanticism. — *Boston Herald*.

It has the straightforwardness of the old-time story-teller. — *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*.

The Kinship of Souls.

A Narrative. By REUVEN THOMAS. 12mo. Cloth, extra. \$1.50.

A delightful story of travel, mingled with interesting discussions on theological and philosophical questions, as well as pertinent observations on other familiar topics. . . . The work is one of more than ordinary interest. — *Green Bag, Boston*.

Altogether one of the most satisfactory, most edifying books that has come to our table in many a month. — *Buffalo Commercial*.

The Bronze Buddha.

By CORA LINN DANIELS. Author of "Sardia," etc. 12mo. Decorated cloth. \$1.50.

"The Bronze Buddha" is an oriental and mystical tale, the element of mystery being a strong quality of the book. Notwithstanding the character of the story, its period is the present time, and the events occur in New York.

In Vain.

By HENRYK SIENKIEWICZ. Translated from the Polish by JEREMIAH CURTIN. 16mo. Cloth, extra. \$1.25.

A love story of modern Poland, by the author of "Quo Vadis," not before translated. The scene is laid at Kieff, and University life there is described.

The Man Without a Country.

A new edition of Edward Everett Hale's famous story, with an introduction giving an account of the circumstances and incidents of its publication, and a new preface by the author, written in the year of the War with Spain. 16mo. Cloth. 50 cents.

LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY, Publishers,

254 Washington Street, Boston.

